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Group facilitation: a case study of student-centered autonomous learning

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Abstract: *This paper presents a case study of student-centered autonomous learning in Group Facilitation, a course for second year students undertaking a human services degree. The design and delivery of this course adopts an approach to learning that places responsibility for what, how, and when learning occurs in the hands of the students. Student are encouraged when planning their learning to consider their personal needs, then reflect on the way they wish to process their environment, and then to consider the content that is of most interest to them. Student evaluation data, provided in the form of rating scales and qualitative comments, suggests that students have very positive views about the approach taken with the course.*

Keywords: *Student-centered learning; autonomous learning; innovative and practical learning*

Introduction

Recent reports on higher education have commented on the pressure on academics to improve the quality of their teaching (e.g., McInnis, 1999). In particular, there has been increasing emphasis on developing 'innovative' and 'practical' approaches to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. If educators are to find ways of improving the learning experience of their students, they must gain a better understanding of how students approach their learning in different learning environments (Byrne, Flood, & Willis, 2002). This paper presents a case study of a practical and innovative approach to creating a learning environment based on the principles of student-centered autonomous learning.

A model of course design and delivery

Figure 1 shows Bentley's (2000) model of facilitation levels as they occur in groups. The model is designed to represent people at the centre, followed by the process, and finally the content. The *content* is *what* you want to learn; the *process* is *how* you want to learn; and the *people* is considering *what each individual (as a group member) needs from the group*. Bentley suggested that there are two main approaches to assessing needs and determining how a group would like to work. Groups can work from outside the circle moving inwards by looking at the content they want to cover, then how they want to process that content, and finally what impact it will have on members of the group. The second approach is from the

inside moving outwards, first looking at the members of the group, then at the way they process their environment, then at the content that is currently of interest to them. What is clear about these two approaches is that when learning is approached from outside the circle we give initial, and often most, importance to the content, whereas when we approach from the inside we give greatest weight to personal needs. And whichever way we approach, it is the process that makes the content useful to the person. Although Bentley's model is proposed as one that describes facilitation levels that occur in groups, it can clearly be applied to University course design and delivery.

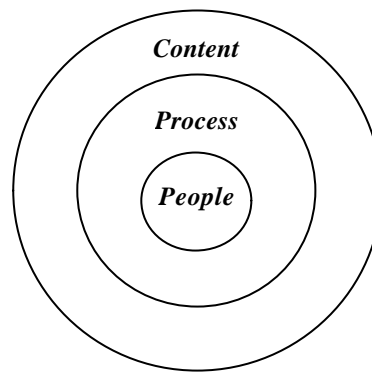


Figure 1: Bentley's model of facilitation levels

Traditionally, university courses are designed and delivered using, at least in part, the former approach. That is, traditional course design has focused first and foremost on the content that needs to be covered in the course. Despite being given considerable thought and effort by many effective teachers and increasing encouragement to do so, attention to the most effective ways of delivering content (i.e., the process) is less common. To a far lesser extent have teachers considered the impact the content and process will have on the students. Arguably, this traditional model of course design and delivery has been successful over many years. Indeed, it may continue to be an effective means in many contexts. However, there are some situations for which the alternative approach, that is a people-centered model, may be more appropriate and effective.

Fundamental to a 'people' or student-centered approach to course design and delivery is the principle of autonomous learning, that is, learning that is essentially concerned with individuals making decisions about, and accepting responsibility for, their own learning (Holec, 1988; Pierson, 1996). Chan (2001) suggests that an autonomous learner would be expected to engage in some, if not all, of the following behaviours: setting learning goals, and identifying and developing strategies to achieve them; developing study plans; reflecting on his/her learning and identifying means of addressing problems; identifying and selecting relevant resources and necessary support; and assessing his/her own progress and defining his/her own criteria for evaluating performance and learning. Put simply, autonomous learners are expected to be able to make significant decisions about, and assume responsibility for *what, how, and when* learning will occur (Van Lier, 1996).

This paper describes a course, *Group Facilitation*, which is based on the principles of autonomous learning. The course adopts a student-centered approach to learning whereby students are encouraged to first look at their personal needs, then at the way they wish to process their environment, and then at the content that is of most interest to them.

Design and delivery of *Group Facilitation*

The aim of *Group Facilitation* is to develop and enhance knowledge of group dynamics and facilitation and to work toward mastery of the skills required to apply that knowledge in practical situations. Approximately 90-100 students participate in *Group Facilitation* which is a mandatory course positioned in the first semester of the second year of a human services degree. Five workshop groups, each comprised of 18-20 participants and one learning facilitator (a member of the teaching staff) meet for 3 hours per week on nine occasions throughout the semester.

Some of the more specific learning objectives that are included in the course outline are:

- to develop an understanding of theories, models, and concepts underlying group processes;
- to gain skills for facilitating groups;
- to develop interpersonal and small group process skills;
- to develop the ability to work in a team;
- to successfully integrate theory and practice;
- to encourage self-direction and independent learning.

What happens prior to commencement of the course?

The preparation phase is important for both students and staff. Two weeks prior to commencement of the course, students are sent a letter welcoming them to the course, a copy of the course outline, and a reading entitled 'Working with Groups' (Bentley, 2000). The letter provides some background information about the course and explains that *Group Facilitation* may be a different experience from other courses they have completed, and that students have a good deal of responsibility for both the course content and the processes by which that content is delivered. The outline provides administrative information about the course, outlines the teaching philosophy of the staff involved, and outlines assessment. Finally, the reading entitled 'Working with Groups' exemplifies the experiential philosophy of the design and delivery of the course.

This preparation phase for students is considered to be crucial to the success of the course. As Ellington (2000, p. 313) commented, "problems tend to arise when there is a clear mismatch between the prevailing learning model and the model that learners expect.... Good teachers should try to ensure that such mismatches do not happen". Moreover, it has been proposed that students' preparedness and readiness for autonomous learning will determine the level of autonomy that they could achieve in the learning process (Chan, 2001). We have found that preparing students for 'something different' has increased interest and enthusiasm for many students and resulted in a more accurate match of expectations for the majority of students.

A second important aspect of preparation is the 'warming-up' process in which the learning facilitators engage. This is somewhat different from preparation in other courses in that the focus is not on the content that will be 'taught' but on possible processes that may be engaged. For this purpose, reflections and experiences from past semesters are useful—particularly for new staff members. Potential scenarios are discussed and views shared on how those scenarios could be processed. In this course, facilitators are required to facilitate *on the spot*, when and how a particular situation requires. Thus, typical tutorial or teaching preparation is not possible, and visualising and preparing for potential scenarios is probably

the best preparation for a facilitator. This form of interaction and discussion between learning facilitators occurs throughout the semester.

What happens when the workshop groups first meet?

When the participants arrive in the room in the first week of semester, we assume they have read the material posted to them. The process that follows very much depends on the individual facilitator and the group. Sometimes a student comment is enough to get the ball rolling. For example, in one instance a student announced, “I’ve heard about this course and it sounds great”. On that occasion the student was simply asked to share what she had heard and what she thought was great about it. That was enough to generate a considerable amount of discussion about the course, resulting in shared expectations and views. In another group a student announced, “I’ve heard about this course and I’m dreading it”. The facilitator in that group asked the student to share what she had heard and what she was not looking forward to. A similar discussion ensued as had occurred in the aforementioned group, again resulting in shared expectations and views.

On some occasions the facilitator may introduce him/herself and welcome the participants to the group. This brief introduction may be followed with one or more open, but somewhat focussed, questions. For example, a facilitator may ask “Any comments about the readings you received in the mail?” or “What did you think about our manner of introducing you to this course?” The very brave facilitator may open the session with much broader comments and/or questions like “What would you like to do now?” or “Where do you think we should begin?” In most cases, regardless of the manner in which the workshop commences, a process ensues in which a considerable amount of discussion takes place.

Of course what the facilitator needs to ensure, for the process that is being encouraged in this course, is that this does not become a student-question and teacher-answer session, but that students are encouraged to explore the answers to their own questions by discussing them with each other. It is important at these times that the facilitator trusts the group process. Past experience has shown that the more learning facilitators provide answers to questions they are asked, the less chance there is of students engaging in the independent, autonomous, student-centred learning that is the philosophy of this course. Often there is much confusion during and at the end of the first three-hour session. In most cases, this results in a considerable amount of discussion (particularly shared frustrations) between students over the following week, which is followed by a focussed and productive discussion in the second session when students arrive with a range of issues they wish to explore. It is important to point out here that our aim is not to frustrate students to the point of disengagement with their learning. On the contrary, they are often frustrated to the point of deep engagement with their learning in this course.

As the semester progresses...

The way each group progresses throughout the semester is completely up to the participants in that group. It would be an impossible task to even begin to describe the myriad of possible and/or actual journeys that one or more groups may follow. However, some general statements, together with some examples, may provide some insight into what occurs in *Group Facilitation*.

Students often approach us (sometimes as early as week 2) and ask if they can try out their facilitation skills with the group. The student is encouraged to propose their idea to the rest of the group and on that basis goes ahead and plans and conducts a facilitation session. It is often an action like this that can move a group forward—other students seem to *click* with this

behaviour and recognise it as something that they should engage in. An initial volunteer is often the catalyst for a deluge of volunteers who start to “book in” to facilitate sessions over the coming weeks.

Some groups move ahead quickly, others more slowly. Some students facilitate only because they are required to (as part of the assessment requirements) and others take whatever opportunity they can to practice their skills. Some are very hesitant to get up in front of the group and take a small step by assisting someone else, e.g., scribing for them on the whiteboard, distributing some materials, and/or taking a background role in the other person’s facilitation. An example of the in-depth feedback process that occurs at the completion of a student’s facilitation session (whether it is for practice or assessment) is provided in the textbox that follows.

An example of feedback provided to a student facilitator.

In week 4 of semester, Karen asked me if she could facilitate a session on “group development”. I responded that I thought it sounded like a great idea and suggested Karen ask the rest of the group if they thought that would be useful for them. They replied in the affirmative (I am yet to work with a group of students who respond negatively to any student who wants to facilitate a session in a workshop).

The following week Karen facilitated a 40 minute session on group development. She had carefully thought-out and prepared the session and used a range of processes including small group work, whole group discussion, and presented some theory on group development.

At the end of the session we engaged in the following process of feedback.

1. *I asked Karen what she thought she had done well..* she felt she had managed the time well and that she was pleased she had met a personal challenge of facilitating the group because she was very nervous about working in front of a group. These points were discussed in some depth both in relation to Karen’s own experience and by generalising them to other group facilitation situations.

2. *I then asked Karen what she might do differently next time*, if she had the opportunity to facilitate again. She responded that she would have asked another member of the group to co-facilitate with her – that it would have been useful to have someone scribing on the whiteboard so she didn’t have to stall the discussion while she scribed. The advantages and disadvantages of co-facilitation were then discussed in some depth.

3. *Next, the rest of the group provided Karen with some feedback.* They offered comments about things they thought she had done well and then some suggestions for improvement – each of them resulting in more discussion and being generalised to other facilitation situations (students are very reticent at first about critiquing their colleagues’ work. They do not see that as their role, that is for the “teacher” to do. Their critiquing skills improve throughout the semester, however, both in terms of being more willing and comfortable about offering comments, and being more specific in giving that feedback.)

4. *I then asked Karen if she would be interested in me providing some suggestions for future facilitation.* I framed my suggestions around group energy levels – introducing Moreno’s energy curve. We discussed the importance of observing and managing energy levels in groups; why and how a facilitator may want to raise or lower energy levels; and the effectiveness of different techniques for adjusting energy levels. Again, the discussion extended to hypothetical examples and was generalised to other groups and situations.

5. *Finally, I told Karen what I thought she had done well.* In particular, I focussed on the Kolb model of experiential learning which Karen had (unknowingly) followed in her facilitation. I drew the model and described it for the group. I related it to Karen’s session, thus linking theory (the model) with the practice that had just occurred. I presented the model as one that is very effective for adult learning, for design of a facilitation session, and for delivery that incorporates a range of learning styles. I then distributed a brief handout on the Kolb cycle. (All of the learning facilitators have a range of ready resources that may be distributed at relevant points throughout the semester).

This 5-step feedback process assists students in reviewing their own facilitation session and provides a form of ‘debrief’ after facilitation. Beginning and ending with positive aspects of the session is important for the facilitator’s confidence and self-esteem. The opportunity to suggest areas of improvement is important for both personal learning and for the learning of other members of the group. It also enhances the reflective and feedback skills of group members. These feedback sessions incorporate a range of models, theories, and concepts about group facilitation—and are significant learning experiences for the whole group. Presenting models and theories to the group at this time, that is immediately after a facilitation session, strengthens the theory/practice nexus and concretises the learning for students. In addition to the feedback provided after individual facilitation sessions, learning facilitators usually schedule some time at the end of each workshop to debrief and consolidate the learnings from that day. Again, this provides the opportunity to introduce and relate relevant models, theories and concepts to the ‘practice’ or experience of the workshop.

Regardless of the process that each group follows through the course of the semester, several outcomes are common to most (if not all) groups. For example, the learning facilitators have some particular models and theories that they ensure are introduced to the group. One model that is covered is the Kolb experiential learning cycle. On at least two occasions throughout the semester the learning facilitator will ensure that this model is discussed in some depth. This discussion may be in the form of a debrief after an individual’s facilitation session (see the example provided) where it can be either applied to a session that *did* follow the cycle, or to show how the session *could have* followed the cycle. What is important here is that the model is presented to the students in a way that applies it practically to the session. At these times we provide the students with a written handout on the particular model we are discussing.

During the semester the course is constantly monitored by the facilitators who reflect deeply and critically on their own performance as facilitators of student learning. As part of this process each learning facilitator maintains a reflective log on their teaching in *Group Facilitation*. Reflections are shared through discussion at weekly meetings with other learning facilitators in the course. Ellington (2000) stressed the importance of such critical reflection on ‘teaching’ sessions with a view to thinking about and planning specific ways for improvement.

Evaluation and discussion

At the end of semester, students are asked to formally evaluate the course via completion of a questionnaire. The questionnaire contains a range of items that students rate for the “extent to which it occurred” on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great extent). The ratings are consistently high. For example, the following three items were each rated an average score of 6.7 in the most recent evaluation:

- were you provided with opportunities to be involved in the structuring of your own learning experiences?
- were you encouraged to take control of your own learning?
- did you have the opportunity to be active participants in the learning process?

The high ratings were supported by qualitative comments that were provided. In general, the comments and feedback that students provided can be categorised into the following themes: the model of learning adopted in the course; the role of the learning facilitator; knowledge and skills in regard to ‘groups’; and learning about self.

Many comments related to the *model of learning adopted in the course*, particularly the practical approach to learning, the opportunity to experience facilitation and relate that practice to experience, and the value of having responsibility and autonomy in the learning environment. Clearly, *Group Facilitation* adopts an adult model of learning. It is generally recognised and accepted that adults tend to learn in different ways from children. Adults are more independent and autonomous in their approach to study, and prefer to learn from their own experience rather than being taught (Knowles, 1990). Adults also prefer to engage in task-or problem-centered approaches to learning and are more likely to be influenced by internal rather than external motivators (Knowles, 1990). The design and delivery of *Group Facilitation* encourages, if not necessitates, students to adopt such an approach to learning.

Several student comments revealed an awareness of a shift from a dependent and passive approach to learning to an independent and active approach. That is, a shift from the traditional teacher-centered approach where knowledge is seen as something to be transmitted by the teacher to a student-centered approach where participants are encouraged to discover learning for themselves. Many of the comments about the model of learning support Chan's (2001) finding that students have more positive views about learner autonomy than educators tend to expect, and welcome the opportunity to work autonomously especially in collaborative work. Some comments that exemplify students' reactions to the model of learning in this course are:

"I enjoyed the "hands on" learning and the opportunity to make decisions about my learning."

"At first I didn't like deciding and being responsible for what we would learn, but now I know I can develop my own learning instead of just responding to someone else's plan."

"I really like the whole approach to learning – the theory and practice sides were well balanced."

A second set of responses centered around *the learning facilitator*. The comments made by students indicated that they saw this role as something different from their experiences in other courses. A large number of positive comments were made about the supportive behaviour, knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes of the facilitator. Arguably, the manner in which *Group Facilitation* is conducted reflects the changing role of university lecturers from teachers to facilitators of learning. Ellington (2000) stated that although the traditional role of university teachers was to impart knowledge to their students via lectures, tutorials and similar face-to-face activities, it is becoming increasingly widely recognised that their main role is to encourage students to become independent learners. He suggested that this change in role may require a fairly radical change in how university lecturers work. It could be argued that *Group Facilitation* presents a significant departure in the approach to learning by the facilitators, from that experienced by students in other courses. Some student comments about the learning facilitators included:

"It was great having a facilitator to watch and learn from."

"I felt so supported – I could never have imagined myself facilitating a group."

"She just stepped in and helped us pull together our learning—we would do something and then she would help us make sense of it."

Another prevalent theme was about the *knowledge and skills in regard to 'groups'* that had been developed and enhanced during the semester. The knowledge and ability to work in teams and groups is becoming one of the most sought after characteristics of university graduates by employers (Harvey, Moon & Geall, 1997). Indeed, our institution espouses their

graduates as those that have developed such skills throughout their degree courses. Encouragingly, the students in *Group Facilitation* considered there was a wide range of group-related behaviours and skills in which they had developed. Some sample comments were:

"I learned how groups function and what guides that functioning."

"I have an awareness of group dynamics, processes and facilitation techniques."

"I can now work more effectively with and within a group."

"The theories and models of group work."

"Frameworks for group meetings."

"How to facilitate a group of people effectively, especially in the human services field."

Finally, and very importantly, there was a category of responses that could be described as *learning about self*. The comments around this theme referred to self-awareness and self-concepts that were increased and enhanced during the course. Some sample comments were:

"I am more aware of myself – and the impact I have on groups and groups have on me."

"I gained confidence and pride in myself."

"I have gained feedback on areas I need to work on in respect to group facilitation."

"I learned to step outside my "safety shell" and give things a go."

"I have greater tolerance and respect of other people's ideas."

Students also made some suggestions for improvement. These were minimal, however, and were not related to the process or content of the course. Therefore, it is not possible to provide a thematic analysis of those responses. The few comments that were made related to the workload in the course. For example, one student commented that there was "a lot of material to cover" and two students suggested that there should be "less reading". These comments were interesting given that the amount of material and reading in the course was self-regulated. A few students offered as a suggestion that the course should have extended over a longer period of time. In particular, one student commented that she "was just starting to gain confidence in facilitation and the course ended".

Together, the high ratings and qualitative comments present an encouraging view of the approach to learning adopted for *Group Facilitation*. These findings are supported by comments made and behaviours displayed by students throughout the semester. But perhaps the most valued feedback was provided after the completion of the course. Three semesters after completing *Group Facilitation*, students undertake a semester-long practicum in the field of human services. During visits by staff in the School to students undertaking the practicum, students and their supervisors have made very positive comments about the knowledge and skills the students have developed through *Group Facilitation*. On many occasions, students referred to this particular course as that which was being most directly applied in the workplace.

Conclusions

This paper has presented a case study of student-centered autonomous learning. The approach to course design and delivery adopted is an effective method of teaching and learning in *Group Facilitation*. Arguably, *Group Facilitation* is a course that is suited to this approach to learning and it is recognised that this approach may not be effective across all university courses. However, learning facilitators should be encouraged to develop and trial innovative and practical approaches to learning, in their particular contexts, to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in tertiary institutions.

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