

# Navigating the labyrinth

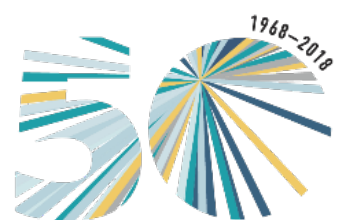
A best practice guide for facilitating change



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## Understanding facilitation

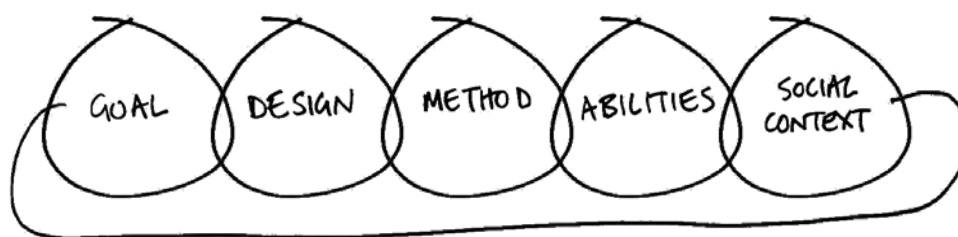
Facilitation brings people together to make a change. It can mean that sum of the collective is bigger than individuals. It helps optimise, or remove waste from, group processes.

Good facilitation can be transformative - bad facilitation can be destructive. It is a professional skill set that takes individual dedication to develop. Yet it also cannot entirely be set alone, it relies on a social context.

Facilitation can feel like being lost in a labyrinth. Yet also walking a labyrinth can be an activity that helps settle the mind and bring clarity.

Facilitation is a kind of leadership, typically bounded in nature, and like good leadership relies on purpose, and passion.

## Elements of Facilitation



To help understand facilitation, it can be broken down into five elements.

Establishing the right goal of the facilitation, ensuring the facilitative activity is designed to meet the goal, that the activity contains the appropriate methods and techniques. It relies on more than technical knowledge however, as the facilitator brings with them interpersonal abilities that are critical to success. These abilities are themselves interrelated with the facilitator's social context.

Facilitation, in turn, through unlocking change in groups of people, has the potential to bring about transformation in social contexts.

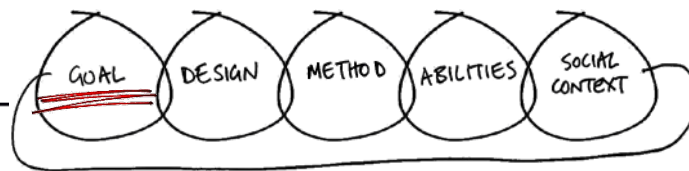
## About this paper

This white paper offers a view onto facilitation for change in Higher Education.

Increasingly good facilitation is recognised as critical to improving how our organisations work. Yet often, facilitation seems like some kind of "magic" that happens when people come together.

Borne from the authors desire to understand the "magic" of facilitation, this work is the result of an Erasmus+ EU funded collaboration to explore facilitation, and produce a practical guide for those working in this sphere in the sector.

Written from the author's own understanding, we welcome further discussion and comment, as our own learning continues to grow.



## Goal

"Critical but often overlooked"

Even though it feels like stating the obvious, it is still necessary to make a clear stand on the importance of setting the direction for the work at hand. As a facilitator for any group, small or large, you need to make sure that the first order of business is to set the right goals. If the goal is already set, it is equally important to work through them, making sure everyone in the project understands what they are.



An effective way to set goals or to develop an understanding of the goals is to ask questions. In doing so you can challenge the set opinions. A deep understanding of the goals will increase the chances of working along the right lines.

A good test for whether your goal is right is to see it through the eyes of the people for whom the work is done. Would they value this?

### Challenging question:

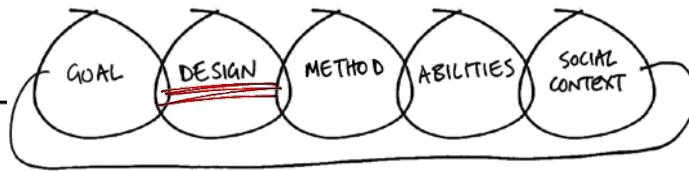
How do you objectively know that goals are right?

What would you do if you discovered the goal was wrong halfway through a session?

Advanced tip:

*Do not take it at face value. Goals sit within social context.*

The goals might change meaning if understood outside the specific social context.

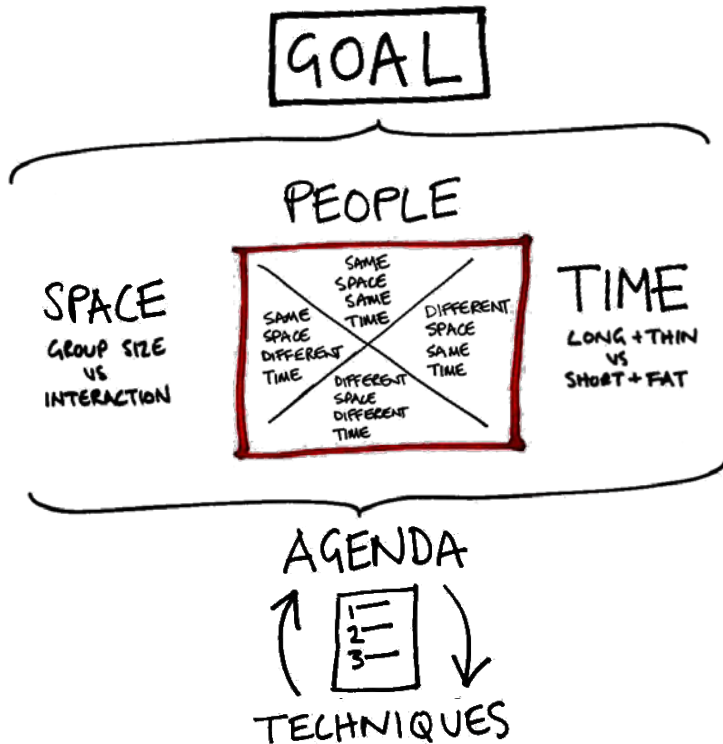


## Design

"Planning is part of the process"

There is a skill and an art to designing a good facilitated intervention. Everything needed to make a good meeting is required.

Humans need to have their basic needs covered, fresh air, breaks at the right times, something to fuel them physically. Without it, you just will not get the best from people. The physical needs of humans bring a natural pattern to a session.



Do not forget to design time in your agenda for people to say what they need to say. It can be useful to have a "check in" at the start to refresh the group the role, remind each other of roles, or any new thinking that might bring.

Think about working as small groups, in parallel, before feedback to the larger team. This can be difficult for people to do, but, may be required in order to move forward in a tight timescale.

Consider carefully your physical environment, lines of sight, eye contact, and any additional requirements your people may bring.

Changing the way or format of how the group works can be a real help in keeping momentum and energy levels high.

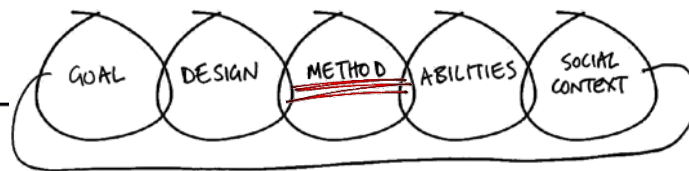
### Challenging question:

Are you designing this for you or is it the best for the group or outcome?

Advanced tip:

*Use unusual space, time or setting.*

When a situation feels locked down, it might be surprisingly helpful to move to a different scene. It might be worthwhile to think this through even before starting on a project. Could there be good reasons to have the group meet somewhere unusual? There is really no limit to this. Outdoors, a pub, at home, go somewhere outside campus. Sometimes it would even make sense to use other times. Try inviting to an evening workshop.

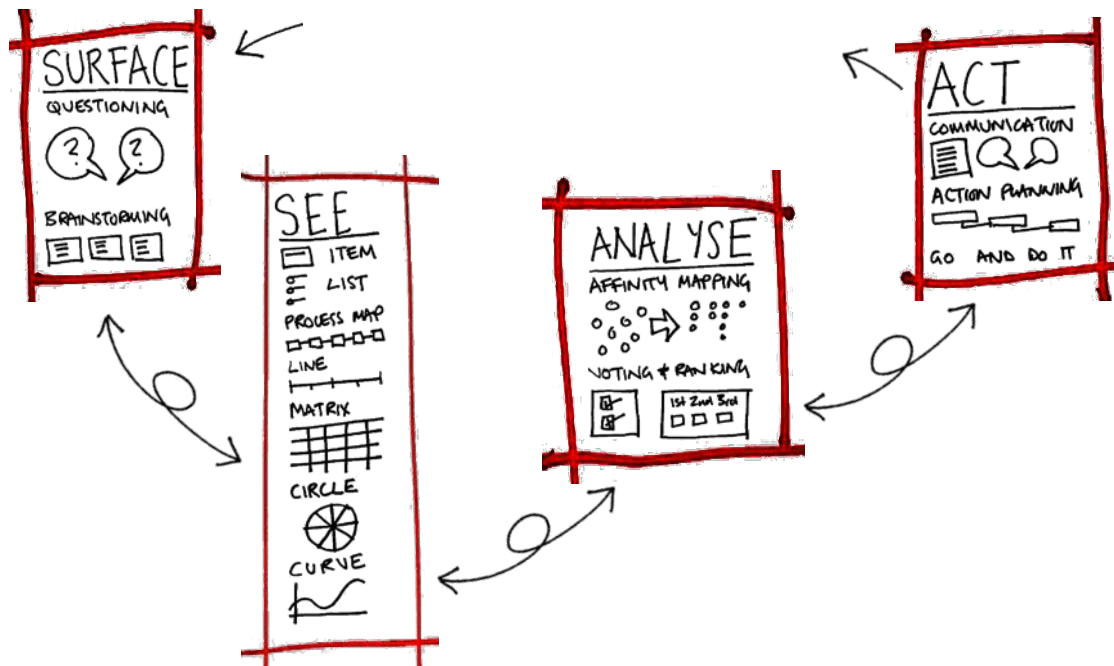


## Method

"Techniques to help brains get round their limitations"

People are always limited in their understanding. This includes the facilitators themselves.

Good facilitation methods focus on enabling individuals to interact with objective information as part of a group and therefore enables us to overcome some of these limitations of individual understanding.



This sounds challenging, and it can be. However, there are many facilitation techniques you can draw from. For many of them, visualisation is key.

There is a process you can follow to help in this; surface, see, analyse and act.

Observation, listening, and analytical skills are key to surface information. Arranging this information clearly in an external structure (writing it down) enables the group to think about it properly. Then the group can decide what to do on this. Critically then the facilitator has the role of ensuring the group turn these thoughts into concrete action.

The illustration above highlights just some of the ways you can arrange information and design your own facilitation techniques.

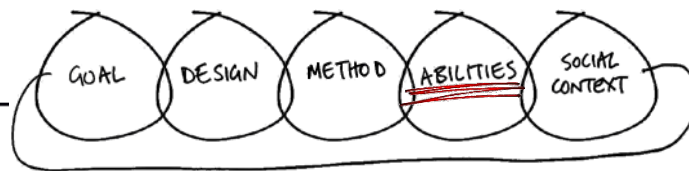
### Challenging question:

Are you over focusing on methods rather than content and progress?

Advanced tip:

*Try facilitating without pens, paper and post-its. What if you were out in the forest?*

Sometimes you do not have access to your favourite tools or equipment. What if you were to facilitate a meeting in the forest? Teach yourself to work with different equipment or no equipment at all and in unusual settings and scenes. You never know when those skills comes handy.

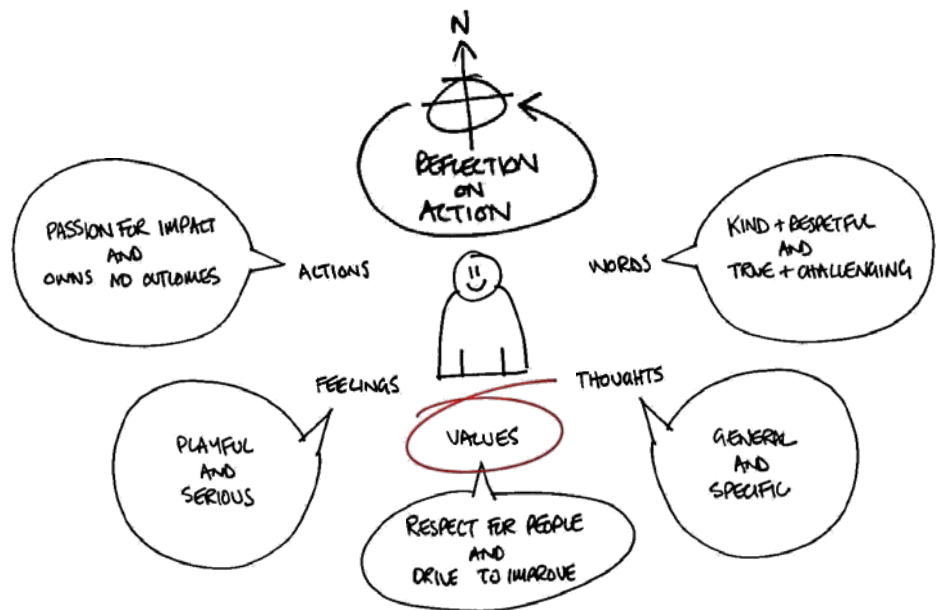


## Abilities

"It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it"

A good facilitator needs to play on a wide range of interpersonal abilities in order to coach a group through a process. A good facilitator can use their interpersonal skills to support an environment where participants feel safe enough to experiment with change.

Listening skills are the foundation of this, as is also finding and use the right words to match the situation. Keep in mind that you are not the superstar, and that it is all about the group and the groups' collective knowledge. If well chosen, the group will be able to find the answer. If not well chosen, there is nothing the facilitator can do to gain the answer. Talk less, listen more. Reflective listening can enable you to guide the group forward.



Courage or confidence is vital - the ability to just go for it even in the knowledge that the result is not certain. What is the worst thing that could happen? The fear of failing may be holding back the next brilliant thing. Failing is mostly harmful only if not learning from it.

Playfulness and curiosity are important, it is unlikely new ideas will come from serious and weighty conversations.

Yet good facilitation requires discipline. An over confident facilitator, speaking too much without listening at all and at the same time overwhelming the participants with new and fast running games would for sure lose the groups' confidence.

It sounds like it is impossible to be the perfect facilitator. It is true every facilitator will be imperfect. However, the best facilitators are always improving. In fact, a facilitator who uses a mistake to improve can demonstrate to the group that group members also do not need to be perfect, as long as each person is working to improve.

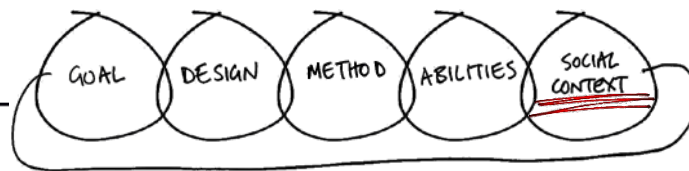
### Challenging question:

You might be really enthusiastic, even really engaging, but is there real meaning in what you are saying?

Advanced tip:

*Learn to trust your instincts. Use other people to observe you. Be open to feedback.*

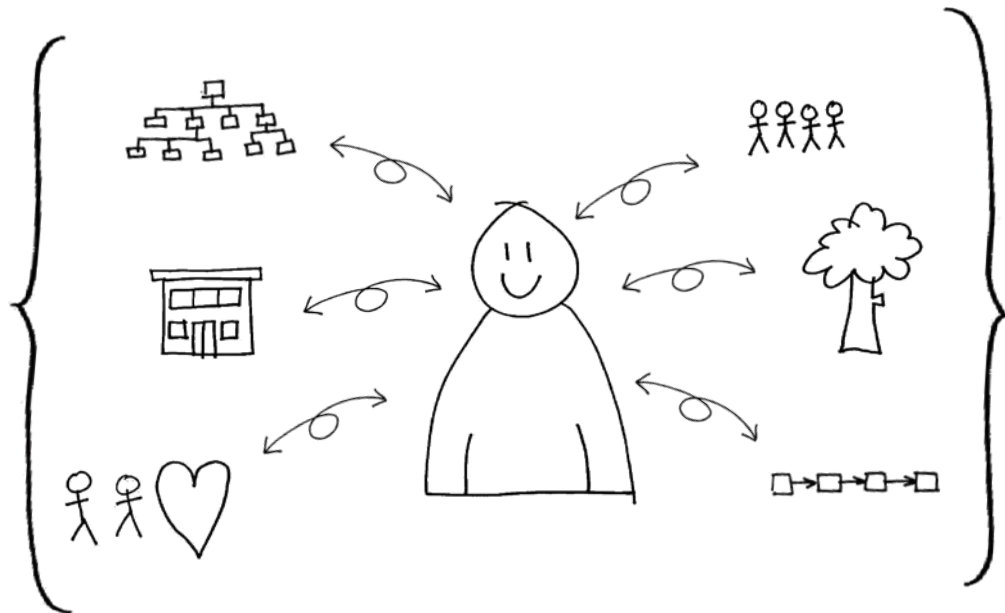
Be even better at what you're good at (rather than trying to be half as good as someone else in what you're bad at!).



## Social context

"It takes a village..."

The saying goes, "it takes a village to raise a child". The proverb fits amazingly well also for the facilitator or the act of facilitating. It means that the work you do to help a group reach a certain goal is affected by the social context in which you are situated. The entire work and social community around you affect you both as a person and your ability to do the job. A friendly, supporting environment makes a good backdrop for healthy process work, whereas a more hard and competitive environment might make it harder.



The saying is also valid for the relation between the facilitator and the group. You need to trust the group - the community - to participate, interact and put their knowledge to use, in order to move towards the goal. Even though you are responsible for the groups' progress, it does not mean that you are responsible for the outcome. Outcome and putting it to action is the responsibility of the group itself, and the project sponsor.

Remember as a facilitator there is more than your work context that will affect your ability to perform. Your family, health, friends, team mates, physical environment, all have an impact. You, as a facilitator, must take appropriate care of yourself in order to undertake this challenging role.

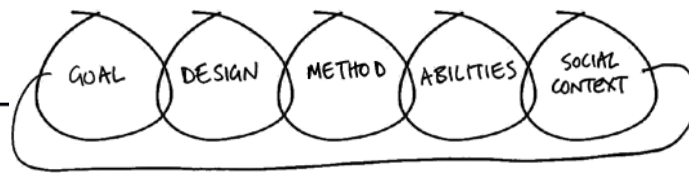
### Challenging question:

What do you do if the social context is "hostile"?

Advanced tip:

*As you facilitate groups, they will also affect you.*

Try to make a note of your own development and learnings from each intervention.



## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank their home institutions, UiT the Arctic University of Norway, Edinburgh Napier University and of course the EU's Erasmus+ programme, without the support of whom this work would not have been possible.

## Background

Facilitation skills have been identified as key to successful improvement initiatives in Higher Education. Why is this? What makes for good facilitation? Are there models of facilitation for improvement? Does good facilitation differ in different national contexts? How can this be taught?

In both UiT, and Edinburgh Napier University, there are examples of best practice in facilitation for improvement. Building on this expertise a working seminar was arranged that resulted in the exploration of the questions above, and more, resulting in this published output.

This output focuses on best practice and offers suggestions for practitioners in the sector.

This will lead to the rollout of training and development for facilitation skills in UiT the Arctic University of Norway and in Edinburgh Napier University, supporting the development of internal capability to deliver the change required to meet our future ambitions.

Through publication and dissemination at conference events, we hope to share this learning further across the sector.

Successful facilitation can be a key enabler in "building effective and efficient Higher Education systems" an area prioritised by the renewed EU agenda for Higher Education, adopted by the European Commission in May 2017. Developing expert facilitation capability speaks to "good institutional leadership and effective internal cooperation".

## About the Authors

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