

Reflections on the history of professional process facilitation

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In this article I outline a history of professional process facilitation, with particular reference to developments in the UK and the USA since the Second World War. I trace the modern origins of facilitation from institutional and theoretical developments in the mid to late 1940s, through an extended period of exploration, research and development in the 1950s - 1970s, the first formal education programmes on both sides of the Atlantic in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the foundation of the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) in 1994 to the subsequent development of a first generation infrastructure for the facilitation profession. I conclude with a call for an ever richer and more comprehensive historical account of the ideas, people, organisations, places, and events that have shaped, and continue to shape, the emerging field of professional process facilitation.

Keywords-

facilitation, process facilitation, profession, history, International Association of Facilitators.

Introduction

While there have been many publications in recent years on theoretical and practical aspects of facilitation (Chapman, 2011), there have been fewer with respect to its history and development as a profession. Writings I am aware of on this topic include a chapter on 'mapping the field of facilitation' in Dale Hunter's book 'The Art of Facilitation' (Hunter, 2007), which highlights the consensus decision making process of traditional wisdom circles and the Quakers. Another is a posting to the IAF forum on 'events that shaped the facilitation profession' by the then IAF Chair, Gary Rush (Rush, 2008). There is also a section in John Keltner's 1989 paper which tracks the study of group process during World War II, the post war development of the National Training Laboratory in the USA, T-Groups, and the development of the leader-trainer-facilitator role (Keltner, 1989).

In this article, I outline a history and timeline of how the field of professional process facilitation has emerged. My particular focus is on developments in the UK and the USA since 1945, and on the role of the process facilitator (as distinct from other facilitative roles which may deal with the content of a discussion). My aim is to promote a continuing conversation amongst colleagues that further enriches and deepens our understanding of the field.

My own interest in this topic was rekindled by a workshop led by Martin Gilbraith on 'the facilitation

profession: past, present, future', at the IAF Europe Conference at Edinburgh in 2007. I had been working as a specialist facilitator since 1997, and this workshop offered me an opportunity to reflect for a while on the field of facilitation as a whole. The workshop used the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) '[Historical Scan](#)' [method](#), which provides a framework for building a rich picture of events and connections, with reference to a common timeline spanning past, present and future. We focused on three aspects that relate to the facilitation profession: individual practitioner journeys; the facilitation profession, and the wider social, community and global context.

Continuing in the spirit of the Edinburgh workshop, this article is a 'big picture' piece - a whistle stop tour and an overview of the field. It traces the origins of facilitation after the Second World War in response to the social imperative for alternatives to war. The story continues through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s with an extended period of exploration, research and development leading to the launch of formal education programmes in the 1980s. The continuing growth of practitioner numbers and interest in the field led to the launch of various membership organisations, including the International Association of Facilitators (IAF), and an emerging infrastructure for the facilitation profession in the 1990s, a process which continues to this day.

This is a personal and necessarily highly selective overview of the field with which not everyone will agree. However, I hope it will help to generate interest and continuing dialogue on this subject towards an ever richer and more comprehensive account of the ideas, people, organisations, places, and events that have shaped, and continue to shape, the emerging field of professional process facilitation.

Pre- and post-war origins of professional process facilitation

During the mid to late 1940s, four institutions were established, two on each side of the Atlantic, which were to have central roles in the development of process facilitation. These were the MIT Research Centre for Group Dynamics and the National Training Laboratory (NTL) in the USA; and the Tavistock Institute and the Roffey Park Institute in the UK. To this day, these institutions remain instrumental and influential in the field.

Milestones in facilitation, Box 1:

INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANISATIONS

[Research Centre for Group Dynamics, USA, 1945;](#)

[Tavistock Institute, London, UK, 1946](#)

[Roffey Park Institute, Horsham, UK, 1946](#)

[National Training Laboratories \(NTL\), USA, 1947](#)

[Association for Humanistic Psychology, 1961](#)

[Human Potential Research Group, University of Surrey, UK, 1970](#)

[Institute of Group Analysis, London, UK, 1971](#)

[Institute of Cultural Affairs \(ICA\), Chicago, USA, 1973](#)

[Association for Management Education & Development \(AMED\), UK, 1994](#)

[International Association of Facilitators \(IAF\), USA, 1994](#)

[Australasian Facilitators Network \(AFN\), 1998](#)

The Tavistock launched its journal 'Human Relations' in June 1947 "in the belief that social scientists should work together to combine their disciplinary knowledge in an attempt to understand the character and complexity of human problems" (HR Website, 2011). The first edition included an article by Kurt Lewin, founding figure in the field of social psychology, on 'Frontiers in Group Dynamics: Concept, Method and Reality in Social Science; Social Equilibria and Social Change' (Lewin, 1947).

The 1940s also saw notable advances in the application of theory into new methods and practices. In 1941, Alex Osborne, an advertising executive, framed the four ground rules for the process that became known as 'brainstorming' (Osborne, 1941). Other development processes originating in the 1940s included Action Research, developed by Kurt Lewin in the USA (Lewin, 1946), and Action Learning, articulated by Reg Revans in the UK (Revans, 1980).

By the end of the 1940s, a recognisable framework of institutions, journals, and development processes was in place that serves the field of facilitation to this day.

The years of exploration

On these foundations, the decades that followed might be summarised as 'the years of exploration'. New methods of experiential inquiry, such as T-groups ('training groups') and 'encounter' groups pioneered at NTL, yielded new insights, sometimes painfully so, into the fundamentals of group process. New journals were launched to report the findings (see Boxes 2 and 3). The Journal of Humanistic Psychology first appeared in Spring 1961. The opening article was by Abraham Maslow, with the title 'Health as Transcendence of Environment' (Maslow, 1961). The NTL's Journal of Applied Behavioural Science followed in March 1965, its first edition including papers by Carl Rogers ('Dealing with Psychological Tensions') (Rogers, 1965), and Chris Argyris ('Explorations in Interpersonal Competence') (Argyris, 1965).

Milestones in facilitation, Box 2

FIRST PUBLICATIONS OF JOURNALS IN THE FIELD

[Human Relations Journal, 1947](#)

[Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 1963](#)

[Journal of Applied Behavioural Science, 1965](#)

[Organisations & People \(AMED\), 1994](#)

[Group Facilitation, Research and Applications Journal \(IAF\), 1999](#)

The years of refinement

Two notable publications in 1989 stand out for me, both articulating with new clarity the role of the process facilitator. The first edition of John Heron's 'The Facilitator's Handbook' (the first book that I read on the subject) and John Keltner's paper of the same year which discussed the functions and types of groups in society, the role of the group process facilitator as a catalyst to group process (as distinct from other roles that may be facilitative in affect but deal with content), and intervention strategy. After thirty years or more of exploration, these publications helped to establish a more refined, systematic and detailed exposition of the role and method of the process facilitator.

This led to further landmark publications in the field, including 'The Skilled Facilitator' by Roger Schwarz in 1994; 'The Facilitation of Groups', the second of three books co-authored by Dale Hunter, Ann Bailey and Bill Taylor in 1996; and 'Understanding Facilitation' and 'Practical Facilitation', both by Christine Hogan, in 2003.

In 2007, the growing international recognition of facilitation and the value of participatory dialogue in sustainable community building was recognised with the publication of the United Nations report, 'Participatory Dialogue: Towards a Stable, Safe, and Just Society for All'.

Milestones in facilitation, Box 3

SOME NOTABLE PAPERS AND PUBLICATIONS

A theory of motivation (Maslow, 1943)
XY theory (McGregor, 1960)
Psychosynthesis (Assagioli, 1965)
Behavioural sequences in small groups (Tuckman, 1965)
Theory of process (Young, 1976)
The act of will (psychosynthesis) (Assagioli, 1973)
Single & double loop learning (Argyris and Schon, 1978)
Organisation development (French and Bell, 1978)
Frogs into princes (NLP) (Bandler and Grinder, 1979)
Process consultation (Vol. 2) (Schein, 1987)
The facilitator's handbook, (Heron, 1989)
Facilitation: catalyst for group problem solving (Keltner, 1989)
The skilled facilitator (Schwarz, 1994)
The facilitation of groups (Hunter, Bailey and Taylor, 1996)
Understanding facilitation (Hogan, 2003)
Practical facilitation (Hogan, 2003)
IAF handbook of group facilitation (Schuman, 2005)
The art of facilitation (Hunter, 2007)
Participatory dialogue: towards a stable, safe, and just society for all (United Nations, 2007)

I am sure that fellow facilitators will want to add to the publications in this list!

From theory to practice

Developments in facilitator practice paralleled advances in theory (see Box 4). The portfolio of established development processes and methods available to the facilitator practitioner steadily increased:

Within the general methodology of process facilitation, this portfolio of methods helped practitioners to engage with community and business organisations in all walks of life. Numerous organisations offering professional facilitation services entered the market, although I do not address this phenomenon here.

Milestones in facilitation, Box 4

DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES AND METHODS

Brainstorming (Osborn, 1941)
Action research (Lewin, 1946)
Action learning (Revans, 1940s, 1980)
Dialogue (Bohm, 1970s, 1996)
Co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1971)
Technology of participation (ICA, 1971)
Metaplan (Schnelle and Schnelle, 1979)
Open space technology (Owen, 1984)
Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, 1980, 1987)
Future search (Weisbord and Janoff, 1992)
World cafe (Brown and Isaacs, 1995, 2001)

The formalisation of facilitator education

The late 1970s and 1980s saw the first steps towards the formalisation of facilitator education (see Box 5).

Milestones in facilitation, Box 5

FACILITATOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Human Potential Research Project, University of Surrey, Diploma in Facilitation Styles, 1978
NTL Masters Programme in Organisation Development, 1980
ICA, Technology of Participation Training, 1986
Roffey Park Masters in People and Organisation Development, 1991
Human Potential Research Group, University of Surrey, Masters Programme in Change Agency Skills and Strategies, 1992
Ashridge Masters in Organisation Consulting, 1997
Ashridge Doctorate in Organisational Change, 2006
Roffey Park, Diploma in Facilitation, 2008

In 1978, the Human Potential Research Project (HPRP), first established by John Heron at the University of Surrey eight years earlier, launched its first 'diploma in facilitation styles'. The first cohort met for 120 days over two years and included 18 students from diverse fields, including medicine, psychiatry, nursing administration, psychotherapy, education, social work, voluntary work, and parenthood.

INTL introduced its Masters Programme in Organisation Development in 1980, and in 1986, the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) launched its Technology of Participation training.

The HPRP, (re-named as the Human Potential Research Group (HPRG) in 1988) went on to launch the MSc Change Agency and Skills Programme at the University of Surrey in the UK in 1992. This is the programme that I engaged with in 1999 and graduated from in 2003. Further programmes launched in the UK include the Masters in Organisation Consulting at the Ashridge Business School in 1997, the Ashridge

doctorate in organisational change in 2006, and the Diploma in Facilitation at Roffey Park in 2008. Since 1974, facilitation has become the focus of an increasing number of [PhD dissertations](#) (Thorpe, 2008).

These initiatives marked a new phase in the development of professional process facilitation - the move from exploration to more formal systems of education and research. The number of practitioners in the field with a more formal process of education behind their practice began steadily to increase. Facilitation was moving from the lab to the community at large and the market place.

Professional associations and the emergence of a profession

The 1990s saw a further milestone with the establishment of associations and networks to support the growing community of practice. In the USA, the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) was established in 1994. In the same year, the Association for Management Education and Development (AMED) was formed out of the Association of University Teachers of Management in the UK. The Australasian Facilitators Network (AFN) based in Australia, New Zealand, South-East Asia and the Pacific has been meeting as the AFN since 1998 and informally, with other identities, since 1992.

As the international membership of the IAF grew, IAF took the lead in a series of member-led projects and initiatives to put a professional development infrastructure in place for the emerging profession. These included the annual IAF conference, the statement of foundational facilitator competencies, the statement of values and code of conduct for facilitators, the Certified Professional Facilitator (CPF) programme, and the Group Facilitation Journal.

Milestones in facilitation, Box 6

THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FACILITATORS

[IAF founded, January 1994](#)

[first IAF conference, 'The Art and Mastery of Facilitation', Denver, USA, 1995](#)

[launch of 'Group Facilitation: A research and applications journal', 1999](#)

[statement of foundational facilitator competencies](#)

[certified professional facilitator \(CPF\) programme](#)

[statement of values and code of conduct for facilitators, June 2004](#)

Within ten years of its foundation, the members and supporters of the IAF had laid out the framework for a profession. The transition from community of practice to established profession was under way.

Summary and conclusion

This article has outlined a history of professional process facilitation, with particular reference to developments in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) since the Second World War. The modern origins of facilitation can be traced to institutional and theoretical developments in the mid to late 1940s, through an extended period of exploration, research and development in the 1950s - 1970s, to the first formal education programmes on both sides of the Atlantic in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As the number of practitioners of facilitation grew, various professional networks and associations were set up to support the emerging community of practice - including the International Association of Facilitators (IAF).

Since the late 1990s, the IAF has led the development of a first generation infrastructure for the facilitation profession. Initiatives have included the development of a statement of facilitator competencies, a professional code of conduct, a professional certification process, a facilitation journal and an international conference programme.

In conclusion, I believe that a continuing study of its history is an important endeavour for any profession. A secure sense of origins and the journey past helps to establish a sound foundation for future growth and development. With this thought in mind, I call for an ever richer and more comprehensive account of the ideas, people, organisations, places, and events that have shaped, and continue to shape, the emerging field of professional process facilitation. I am aware of the atlanticist bias of this article, and in particular call for further contributions from as wide a range of cultural perspectives as possible. Finally, in the writing of this article, I am reminded that, as facilitation practitioners, we are indebted to, and stand on the shoulders of, those pioneers, researchers and teachers who have led the way in the development of the field over many decades. It is time for a facilitation 'hall of fame' to honour their contribution.

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