

Facilitation for Info Pros: Workshop Notes

By Yolanda Koscielski.

On January 28th, 2011, I attended the excellent BCLA Continuing Education workshop, "Facilitation for Info Pros". This was an all-day session held at the lower level of VPL Central Branch, presented by Laura Matheson (British Columbia Securities Commission) and Anne O'Shea (Vancouver Public Library). Below are a few highlights.

What is Facilitation?

Facilitation is neither presenting nor leading a group. First, a facilitator should be neutral, distant from the situation. (It's challenging to facilitate a group you are actively involved with day-to-day.) The facilitator should also make sure everyone is heard and can run with an idea. She puts participants in the mindset that they are in the session to generate ideas, not to be receptive to an idea that is being pitched to them. The facilitator should think of herself as a process specialist, whereas the participants should think of themselves as the content specialists.

Time and Place

When facilitating, take responsibility for clear timing, process, and setting. People have obligations and no one likes to run late; let people out when you say you will. Notice if people are cold, tired-looking, etc. Be adaptive.

Setting the Stage: The PPPRs

Begin all facilitation sessions by identifying the PPPRs.

- *Purpose*: why are we here?
- *Profit*: why is it important for participants to participate?
- *Process*: how is this going to happen? Tell people. It won't happen naturally. For instance, "today we are going to be using 2 brainstorming techniques..."
- *Roles*: introduce yourself, including a statement that you will be neutral, and a description of the role of participants. Be clear about any advance preparation you are expecting.

Facilitation Session Types

Throughout the day, we had the opportunity to experiment with different facilitation session types, both as facilitators and participants. For instance, creative facilitation sessions are one major type, and include *Sticky Note Brainstorming*. Structured facilitation sessions are another main type.

If you are looking for input on designing things, suggesting new processes, or coming up with ideas, use a *creative processes-type* facilitation session. This type of session is not as suited for soliciting feedback on existing services.

Some general principles of the brainstorming facilitation process:

- Don't judge or criticize
- The crazier, the better
- Quantity over quality
- Build on and steal from the ideas of others
- Stay focused on the topic

As workshop participants tried their hands at different facilitation types, questions arose in practice. For example, how can I encourage my participants without sounding like a kindergarten teacher? We discovered that while some encouragements may sound condescending to the facilitator, it was actually experienced by participants as being very helpful. Or, how do I divide my attention between reviewing multiple sticky notes and interacting with my participants? Having participants read and categorize the notes with you is one possible solution.

Other facilitation session types covered in the workshop include the *Fast Decision Making Process* (a non-consensus process), *Co-facilitation* (capitalize on your co-facilitator's strengths, while minimizing individual weaknesses), and the *Impact/Effort Grid* (categorizing a number of ideas or services in order to set priorities).

Participants left the Continuing Education session with a toolkit of facilitation session types, tips to facilitate a range of sessions smoothly, and some valuable hands-on experience trying them out. Thank you to Anne and Laura for a great session!

Yolanda Koscielski is the Liaison Librarian for Criminology, Engineering, and Computing Science at Simon Fraser University Library