Towards Online Facilitator Competencies in Collaborative Higher Learning Programmes

Stephen J. Thorpe
School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences
Auckland University of Technology
sthorpe[at]aut.ac.nz

Abstract— Collaborative academic programmes typically involve a mix of face-to-face and online collaborative engagement between organisations. Individuals and groups within and between organisations need to effectively work together across time, distance and cultural norms. The threshold competencies needed by group leaders to effectively facilitate the online aspects of these communication activities is an emerging area within an expanding knowledge of intercultural collaborative exchange. Drawing on a number of facilitated online discussions, involving 60 practicing group facilitators from 13 countries, this paper presents an initial series of online facilitator competencies that were synthesised from in-depth conversations held within a series of online facilitation skills training programmes held over four years. These competencies provide a new framework for expanding the awareness of the complexity and skills required of group facilitators in intercultural collaborative programmes. The new framework presents seven areas of online facilitator competencies and the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to demonstrate those competencies.

Keywords-Facilitator Competencies, Group Facilitation, Virtual Teams, Collaborative Computing, Inter-cultural Collaborative Programmes

I. Introduction

In any collaborative partnership there are a number of inputs, processes, activities, and outputs. Some of these are conducted face-to-face and in-person; and others are conducted completely online between organisations at different levels. This paper focuses solely on those aspects conducted online between academic organisations and investigates what are the threshold competencies that are required to effectively facilitate those online aspects of collaborative partnerships.

Through a range of internet-enabled software tools communication is conducted between managers, between administrative staff, between academics, between academics and their students, and more. Online communication within these collaborative conversations requires a range of skills and competencies for those facilitating and leading collaborative programmes. This paper synthesises what several groups of leading group facilitators have discussed and identified as key criteria to facilitating and leading online groups

A. Online Collaborative Groupwork

The world of groupwork has significantly changed over the last 10-15 years with the rapid rise of computing, networking and in internet-enabled group software. These web tools enable groups of people to work together in ways never before possible. New technologies and devices can now be used by people to plan, lead, conduct, support and share their group work. Considerable advantages

can be realised by organisations through using the wide range of new and emerging forms that online collaborative technologies now can offer.

Research (Chidambaram, 1996; Warkentin et al., 1997; Lau et al., 2000; Saunders & Ahuja, 2006; Thorpe, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2011) has shown that online and virtual groupwork has not been as effective or as satisfying to group participants as that of face-to-face groupwork. Group facilitation has been identified as potentially a key part in improving online group effectiveness, outcomes and participant satisfaction (Mittleman, Briggs & Nunamaker, 2000; White, 2004; Pauleen & Yoong , 2001; Rangarajan & Rohrbaugh, 2003; Whitworth & McQueen, 2003; Hunter, 2003; Thorpe 2009; 2011). This can be considered particularly true also for those collaborative partnerships that are using a combination of online and face-to-face inter-communication to maintain and deliver their academic programmes across multiple locations.

While online groups are a relatively new and fast growing phenomenon, group leaders and facilitators are beginning to share their online anecdotes and best practice suggestions with each other. They are asking questions about how they can effectively assist groups working in increasingly multi-modal, multi-cultural, inter-generational and geographically dispersed groups (Thorpe, 2009). Key questions have led to a desire to articulate a satisfactory set of online facilitator competencies that can help identify areas of performance effectiveness and opportunities for furthering professional development.

It is hoped that the competencies proposed in this paper can provide a useful framework for improving awareness of the complexity and skills required of online group facilitators and leaders in intercultural collaborative programmes.

B. Threshold Competencies

Spencer and Spencer (1993) define a competency as, "an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion referenced as effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation." (p. 9). They further describe five types of competency characteristics as:

> *Motives* - Drive, direct and select behaviour towards certain actions and away from others
> *Traits* - Physical characteristics and consistent responses to situations
> *Self-concept* - A person's attitudes, values and self-image
> *Knowledge* - Information a person has in specific content areas
> *Skill* - The ability to perform a certain physical or mental task (p. 11)

They describe competencies as a kind of 'iceberg model' with *knowledge* and *skill* competencies apparent above the visible waterline and beneath the surface are the hidden aspects of *motives*, *traits* and *self-concept*. Skills and knowledge are considered as being relatively easy aspects to develop through training. However developing an individual's motives, traits and self-concept competencies are considered the most difficult to develop.

While competencies are not necessarily the panacea of an organisational performance management system (Zingheim, 1996), nor are they radically useful in improving the quality of communications, they do however provide a useful framework for organisations and people wanting to develop and improve their work and effectiveness. Importantly they can also be helpful to guide professional development for organisations keen to up-skill their group facilitators and leaders. Competencies

therefore provide a useful framework for awareness of the complexity and skills required of those working in inter-cultural collaborative programmes.

C. Group Facilitation Competences

Pierce, Cheesebrow & Braun have made a significant contribution to the area of facilitator competencies in their seminal work published in 2000 in *Group Facilitation*. Building on this work, and on the comments from other prominent facilitators and authors (Wilkinson, 2000; Schwarz, 2000; Kirk, 2000; Tahar, 2000; Baker & Fraser, 2005), the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) developed a set of Foundational Facilitator Competencies (now called the Core Facilitator Competencies). This set of competencies was then picked up by the IAF Board as a key resource for a strategic initiative to develop and disseminate a Certified Professional Facilitator (CPF) programme that they have developed for group facilitators internationally.

Other competencies work, such as McFadzean's criteria for small groups (2002) and Kolb's (et al., 2000, et al., 2002) model of small group facilitator competencies are based on input from facilitators. Stewart's (2004) study of high-performing and threshold competencies for group facilitators drew on observations of group facilitation in workshop environments and interviews. Her competencies were then validated through a following survey of group facilitators and clients of facilitation (Stewart, 2006). Whardale (2008) interviewed both internal and externals facilitators and the managers employing them to develop a useful set of criteria.

These are helpful and valuable contributions to the area, however despite many facilitators now working with online groups, as yet, a set of online facilitator competencies has not been developed and published. This paper aims to address that gap and begin the work towards developing a satisfactory set of criteria for those facilitating in the online technology-enabled groupwork space.

II. Method

A. Research Question

The primary focus of this study was to investigate *what do practicing group facilitators identify as criteria for effective online facilitation?*

B. Research Design

The development of the competences presented in this paper was both intended to be exploratory and explanatory. There was a need to explore what the competencies facilitators might identify as guiding their own practice and there was a need to integrate with what was already known from the practice in face-to-face facilitation work. Group facilitators in this sense were considered central to the study and were considered as experts that would be able to reflectively articulate their own practice and experiences; and through a group process develop an agreed and synthesised set of working criteria.

Facilitators are well known as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1993) and, as developmental experts, they are naturally interested in improving their own practice. The intent of the research design was to involve online facilitation practitioners in the research so that their motivations, ways of looking at

things, and questions could have value and that their experiences would be at the heart of the data generated. Group facilitators offer unique expertise with both group behaviour and group processes. As the research project aimed to explore online group facilitation competencies themselves, a research design that was aligned with the underpinning values and beliefs of facilitators was considered beneficial. The design allowed all those involved to be self-directed, and in a position to contribute both to the formulation of propositions, associated discussion, reflection, analysis and synthesis with others of their own community of practice.

It was considered highly beneficial to explore online facilitator competencies through a series of online facilitated group processes. The approach illustrated the principle that "Research questions that explore an online phenomenon are strengthened through the use of a method of research that closely mirrors the natural setting under investigation." (Geiser, 2002, p. 3).

The group process provided a useful validation process that could take into account multiple perspectives on what could be considered effective practice. A further benefit of a group-based process is the natural challenging of uncritical subjectivity that improves the quality of each group's outcomes. For example, participants could inquire and challenge the premises and propositions being offered from each other to test for their soundness and validity. The group approach also allowed for divergence and convergence over the criteria and all their parts enabling a range of forms of knowing to articulate within the area of the topic more thoroughly.

It was also important to involve facilitators as there was no existing research in the area of online facilitator competencies. There was a real need to identify the important variables, by looking for patterns and themes in a series of reflectively articulated criteria and to identify how they linked to each other across groups.

As the nature of criteria development can be highly contextual and subjective the investigation needed to be explanatory to identify the underlying attitudes, beliefs, traits and motivations that were shaping the chosen criteria. Therefore, in order to gain evidence of the facilitators' competencies, the research was designed to gain the perceptions of the facilitators over a number of developmental conversations with differing groups of facilitators engaging in the same topic.

C. Participants

In total 60 group facilitators were involved in this study through a series of small groups (8-12) of participants joining in six different 10-week training programmes delivered by Zenergy between March 2007 and November 2010. The participants were from 13 different countries and spread across 15 different time zones.

As part of the 10-week online training programme facilitators would participate in two weeks of facilitated conversation on the topic using forum conversations, chat tools, video and teleconferences to discuss, debate, define and synthesize a working set of criteria for online facilitator effectiveness. Each group developed their own set of agreed criteria that were then used later in the training programme as a framework for self and peer assessment on their overall learning and facilitation performance.

D. Open Coding Technique

Each of the criteria in the six sets of competencies that the groups had developed were brought together and coded using open coding techniques (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Crobin 1990). Open coding involves "the naming and categorization of phenomena through close examination of data." (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p. 62). The aim of the coding of each criterion was to develop clusters, and ultimately category titles, that would capture the meaning of the competency descriptions provided.

Where relevant the categorization was linked to common facilitator constructs and terminology from literature that group facilitators would be familiar with and recognise (Schwarz, 2002; Wilkinson, 2004; Bens, 2005; Thomas, 2005; Schuman, 2005; Hunter & Thorpe, 2005; Jenkins & Jenkins, 2006; Hunter, 2007; Kaner, 2007).

III. Results

A. Proposed Competences for Online Group Facilitators

From the synthesis of the coding, merging and categorisation a new set of 26 competencies grouped under seven categories are proposed from those that the facilitator groups had developed.

TABLE I: Competences for Online Group Facilitators

Competences For Online Group Facilitators
Develops a shared group purpose

Initiates conversations on the group purpose
       Works with others to develop the group purpose
       Encourages alignment on the group purpose
       Keeps the group on purpose

Sets and maintains a shared group culture

Care and respect are present in interventions
       Uses behaviours and attitudes that enable a group to more fully participate
       Valid information is shared that enables participants to learn together
       Holding and supporting the group in their culture
       Works with others to set expectations for acknowledgements

Plans and prepares

Develops appropriate lead times
       Prepares access to group technologies
       Ensures that the right decision making people are involved
       Assists members to learn to effectively use the group technologies
       Timely and responsive to others

Knowledgeable and able to work with a range of online collaborative tools

Aware of the advantages and disadvantages of group technologies
       Can match the group technology to the group process and needs
       Keeps up to date with latest developments

Knowledgeable and able to work with a range of group process or methods

Trained and skilled in group process and facilitation
       Aware of advantages and disadvantages of processes and techniques
       Able to work with and manage a diverse group

Communicating with presence
Ability to presence self and others separated by time, distance and cultural separation
Deep listening and careful communication
Enables whole person connection
Reflective practitioner
Ability to rigorously reflect on practice
Identifies gaps between espoused values and beliefs and those reflected in interventions and actions
Seeks evaluation and addresses feedback

IV. Discussion

A. Develops a Shared Group Purpose
Group purpose was seen as central to the facilitators work. Similarly to that of face-to-face facilitation an online facilitator works with the group to develop and clarify the group purpose.

1) Initiates conversations on the group purpose
It was expected that an online facilitator would initiate purpose conversations to allow participants to clarify their understanding and ensure that the purpose of the group was clear to all.

2) Works with others to develop the group purpose
If a group purpose is not articulated or is unclear the facilitator continues to work with the group until a purpose is established.

3) Encourages alignment on the group purpose
Also important was that the facilitator encourages full alignment on the group purpose and avoids any cheap closure (Hunter, 2007, p. 112) from participants eager to engage quickly in the group's task activities.

4) Keeps the group on purpose
The facilitator monitors the group's progress towards the group purpose and makes timely interventions to focus the group on its objective.

B. Sets and Maintains a Shared Group Culture
The group culture was also seen as central to the facilitator's work and considered highly determinant on the success and satisfaction of the group outcomes.

1) Care and respect are present in interventions
It was identified as important that the facilitator takes time to develop and articulate their online interventions to avoid any potential misunderstandings--misunderstandings that can be much more damaging in online groups than in misunderstandings experienced in face-to-face groups where they are more quickly resolved. Respect was considered important in communications for creating a culture where people can freely speak, whilst minimising any cultural or style clashes between participants.

2) Uses behaviours and attitudes that enable a group to more fully participate

The facilitator works to develop and model the behaviours that assist a group to more fully participate. Interactions that are disruptive to the group are addressed both with care for the individual and with respect to the needs of the remainder of the group.

3) *Valid information is shared that enables participants to learn together*
The facilitator encourages sharing of information in the group in a way that enables others to understand, reason and determine for themselves that information's validity. Relevant information is not withheld from participants.

4) *Holding and supporting the group in their culture*
An important behaviour identified is creating space for everyone in the group and for all that is happening in the group--including enabling members to participate through different levels of access and through technological interruptions.

5) *Works with others to set expectations for acknowledgements*
Expectations are set with the group that allow for acknowledgements of important contributions.

C. Plans and Prepares
It was considered that online group sessions involve significantly more planning and preparation than those needed of face-to-face groupwork. Resources and online meeting spaces need to be prepared and shared in advance as well as assisting participants in learning to use those chosen software tools.

1) *Develops appropriate lead times*
The facilitator works to enhance attendance and participation by attending to time differences and providing sufficient lead times, resources and pre-work for participants.

2) *Prepares access to group technologies*
Group software tools often require the facilitator to set up and test access for participants well in advance of an online facilitated session.

3) *Ensures that the right decision making people are involved*
If important decisions are to be made the facilitator works to ensure that the key decision-makers are present and able to participate in advance of the online meeting or group work sessions.

4) *Assists members to learn to effectively use the group technologies*
Unlike face-to-face facilitators, online facilitators are required to often perform an additional technology training role to allow participants to learn the features and functions of a range of online software tools. This role may include preparation of resources for access and software tool use, leading tutorial or orientation sessions in advance, and bringing in other technical specialists to assist.

5) *Timely and responsive to others*
It was expected that an online facilitator would set some clear expectations about time-frames for their responses and make their interventions within an appropriate time-frame so that they will have impact. Requests are addressed and responded to within those expected time-frames.

D. Knowledgeable and Able to Work with a Range of Online Collaborative Tools
It was considered important that online facilitators had an awareness and experience of a wide range of online software tools used for groupwork.

1) Aware of the advantages and disadvantages of group technologies
It was expected that an online facilitator would be able to distinguish between the benefits and features of a wide range of software tools as well as understand the implications of the disadvantages that particular tools may have on groupwork effectiveness.

2) Can match the group technology to the group process and needs
Appropriate tool selection was considered a critical aspect for the online facilitator. Having the ability to effectively match what group process may be needed by the group in its developmental life cycle with a software tool that can support the goals and needs of that process was an important ability.

3) Keeps up to date with latest developments
Online facilitators were expected to be at work with exploring and learning about the changes in collaborative software tools and any developments in emerging group technologies.

E. Knowledgeable and Able to Work with a Range of Group Process or Methods
It was considered important that online facilitators had an awareness of when a group intervention is appropriate and able to work with a wide range of processes and facilitation methods.

1) Trained in group process and facilitation
It was expected that online facilitators would have completed some appropriate training in the use of a group processes, techniques and methods.

2) Aware of advantages and disadvantages of processes and techniques
It was also important that online facilitators have proficiency in the use of a range of group process, techniques and methods and able to distinguish between the benefits and features of them. They also need to clearly understand the implications of the disadvantages of choosing some methods over others.

3) Able to work with and manage a diverse group
This competency involved being able to develop a participatory environment in the group involving the valuing of diversity and using diversity in a group, including: using a range of learning styles, culturally appropriate processes, approaches, participation styles and ways of communicating.

F. Communicating with presence
This competence is the ability to facilitate online groups at a deeply creative and generative level.

1) Ability to presence self and others separated by time, distance and cultural separation
A key ability of an online facilitator is to introduce techniques and interventions to reduce the effects on a group of time differences, geographical distance and cultural separation. Working actively to mirror the group back to itself and improve the participant awareness of others.

2) Deep listening and careful communication
Articulated in the work of Otto Scharmer (2007) as working through the levels of *open mind, open heart* and *open will*; the depth of work an online group can reach is related to the level that a facilitator can take them. The facilitator works through holding and supporting the group through deep listening and careful communication; assisting the group through interventions to harness their collective intelligence and achieve their best performance.

3) Enables whole person connection

This was articulated as the ability to work with individuals and the group not only on an intellectual and cognitive level also but through accessing a range of levels of holistic communication; such as working at the heart or on an emotional level, at the belly or on an intuitive level, and on other levels present and active in a group.

G. Reflective Practitioner

Reflective practice was considered important to monitor, maintain and improve an online facilitator's effectiveness.

1) Ability to rigorously reflect on practice

It was considered important that online facilitators incorporate rigorous reflection practices into the online facilitation activities and experiences they engage in to help better improve their intervention effectiveness and also to contribute to forwarding the profession over time.

2) Seeks evaluation and addresses feedback

It was considered highly important that online facilitators incorporate evaluation and feedback instruments for participants. Areas of praise are acknowledged and areas of concern are addressed.

3) Identifies gaps between espoused values and beliefs and those reflected in interventions and actions

A competency that was considered fundamental to creating integrity in practice and in creating the same level of learning and transformation in online facilitators as it is espoused with the groups they worked with.

V. Conclusion

In any collaborative partnership there are a number of activities conducted online between organisations at different levels. This paper has presented a combined set of criteria distilled and synthesized from a number of facilitated group discussions on the topic of what practicing group facilitators identify as criteria for effective online facilitation. While there may be more work to be done on these criteria, it is hoped that they will be a useful resource for identifying facilitator competencies in the online communication of collaborative academic partnerships. It presents a set of skills and behaviours that offer guidance for efforts to improve the effectiveness of those leading and facilitating collaborative linkages and relationships between partnering organisations.

A. Future Research

Future work is to refine the competencies and descriptors through a pilot survey with groups of practicing online group facilitators to test the validity, completeness and usefulness of the competencies as defined. A wider survey of the 1,200+ members of the International Association of Facilitators can then be conducted to identify any further outstanding categories, refine the criteria included, and to identify any criteria that may yet need to be incorporated.

It is hoped that the online facilitation competency set will extend the Core Facilitator Competencies as defined by the International Association of Facilitators. It is also hoped that the competencies can then be linked to the Certified Professional Facilitator™ (CPF) programme currently offered by the association.

Acknowledgments

Author Bio

Stephen J. Thorpe is an academic, educator, and group facilitator who specializes in group work in the online world. His 2009 PhD from the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand investigated the use of storytelling as a team-building process in the facilitation of online groups. He is a Director of Zenergy and the Acting Head of the School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences at the Auckland University of Technology. He is also the Editor-in-Chief of *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal*, an international multi-disciplinary publication focused on the art and science of group facilitation. His areas of research interest include online groups, global virtual teams, group facilitation, storytelling, inter-cultural collaborative programmes, and e-Government.

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