An Action Research Study to Improve Facilitation Skills Using the Program 'A Council of All Beings'

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Introduction

Environmental education seeks to involve people in solving environmental problems. Hence, some environmental educators facilitate programs that focus on the development of skills through direct involvement in action programs, such as *Waterwatch*. However, many people do not feel confident and/or skilled to initiate, plan or undertake action projects. Therefore, environmental educators also facilitate programs that focus on helping people develop the motivation, skills and confidence to engage in action programs, such as *A Council of All Beings*. Facilitation of these two different forms of programs needs to build on the strengths and capabilities of the people involved so that their skills and perception of themselves as agents of change are enhanced (Kieffer 1984). Effective facilitation skills are essential for environmental educators because they often deal with contested issues, want to foster critical thinking among people and often mediate between community, government and individuals. The purpose of this paper is to: (a) demonstrate the relationship between empowerment, facilitation and social change; and (b) report on an action research process in which I sought to improve my skills in facilitation by using the program *A Council of All Beings*.

Theoretical framework for effective facilitation

The purpose of this section is to: (a) review the theory that supports effective facilitation; and (b) suggest how the relationship between empowerment and facilitation can prepare people for engagement in social action. In this case effective facilitation means facilitation that respects the participants and helps develop their capabilities, participatory competence and success in social action.

Clarification of the theory that guides the facilitator

A facilitator uses skills in communication to help participants get to where they want to go, maintains group rules and plans for future meetings and action. He or she does not make decisions for the group (Coover *et al.* 1985, Corey and Corey 1992, and Shields 1991). Conversely, a 'leader' does make decisions for the group. However, these decisions are modified by the leader giving consideration for specific participants' needs, development and levels of awareness. A leader initiates a process and

decides on certain courses of action without always consulting participants. A leader is not necessarily authoritarian and rigid about workshop structure. As co-facilitator, Kathy Landvogt (1992), argues:

> Leadership can rotate among the group as participants take turns to
> share and teach others.

Leaders use skills in facilitation for discussion and some decision making. However, the theoretical rationale of the program usually supports the style of leadership or facilitation, e.g. a program guided by empowerment theory would rely on shared leadership using skills in facilitation.

Review of skills and techniques required by the facilitator

Work by Corey and Corey (1992) and Shields (1991) suggests that facilitators need a range of skills in communication including:

* active listening, i.e. responding to verbal and non-verbal communication;
* reflective listening, i.e. conveying to participants that they have been understood;
* clarifying, i.e. sorting out confusions and highlighting key issues;
* summarising, i.e. bringing different points together or providing a new starting point; and
* termination, i.e. knowing when and how to bring a discussion or the workshop to a close.

Another important aspect of facilitation is that facilitators need to be clear about their motivations for conducting groups and aware of their strengths and weaknesses (Corey and Corey 1992). This clarity allows the facilitator to be self confident and empowered. As Bobo *et al.* (1991, p. 131) argue:

> Groups appreciate strong facilitators who encourage broad
> participation while keeping them to the subject at hand.

The facilitator involves the participants in setting rules of behaviour for the group. The facilitator, as a member of the group can contribute input. However, a sense of ownership is established if participants decide upon the rules that will guide the group.

A facilitator may or may not be responsible for 'marketing' the workshop. Attendance at a workshop is likely when the topic is well advertised, sounds interesting and is relevant to potential participants. Voluntary attendance usually assures participation (Bobo *et al.* 1991, Corey and Corey 1992).

Workshop format

An effective workshop has a clear structure where all the group rules are known to everyone (joreen 1981). This allows everyone to have equal

opportunity to be involved, appreciate the expectations of the other members and understand the procedures for decision making. A group lacking in structure causes feelings of powerlessness, because only those who know the rules have the power and make the decisions (joreen 1981).

People care about the presentation of their learning environment. Workshop participants like to feel comfortable, both physically and psychologically (Bobo *et al.* 1991, Shields 1991). Facilitation practices that will promote this include welcoming participants, making introductions, and providing a program for the day's activities. Workshops that are participatory and include a variety of activities increase participants' desire for learning (Bobo *et al.* 1991).

The facilitator needs to include evaluation in the workshop format. Evaluation focuses on the outcomes of the workshop from the perspective of the participants' goals, the aims of each activity and the overall workshop. By collaborating on evaluation all the group members have the opportunity to modify future workshops. This aspect of facilitation can teach the skills of action research to the group (the depth of this will vary). Kieffer (1984, p. 29) argues that assisting groups to develop skills in action-research has a 'distinctly empowering effect' because people's accuracy of understanding their environments and experiences is increased and this impacts on the effectiveness of 'their political action'.

Empowerment and facilitation

Empowerment is a process that enables people to make decisions and take actions that increase the control that they have over their lives (Rappaport 1984). The process of empowerment involves developing positive self-esteem, participatory skills and political understanding that enable individuals and groups to engage in social and political action (Kieffer 1984, Shields 1991). Kieffer (1984), whose study of the emergence of empowerment among grass-root activists, argues that empowerment is a long term developmental learning process and develops in four stages. In the first stage, the 'era of entry', people report the importance of emotional experiences that involve recognition of a threat to the individual or those close to them. In the second stage, 'era of advancement', there are three major components, that is, the relationship with an enabler or mentor, supportive peer relationships and the increased 'critical understanding of social and political relations' (p. 20). In the third stage, 'era of incorporation', people learn to deal with the 'permanence and painfulness of structural or institutional barriers to self-determination' (p. 22). In the fourth stage, 'era of commitment' people are fully competent in participatory skills because in effect, they have reconstructed 'their sense of mastery and awareness of self in relation to the political world' (p. 24). The support of an enabler is needed throughout the four stages but, it seems essential during the 'era of advancement'. During this stage

the enabler can best facilitate empowering or participatory skills by giving emotional support and increasing awareness to the political nature of the many conflicts that people encounter in the process of developing participatory competence or empowerment. Thus, the skills and the attitude of the facilitator are an important aspect of a program that enhances the development of empowerment, especially in its early stages.

Empowerment theory is an essential component of the environmental educational program, *A Council of All Beings* (described below). Potentially this program can create opportunities for people to make an 'entry' and/or 'advance' their learning development in empowerment. The activities encourage people to make an emotional connection with their knowledge about environmental destruction and the role of human decision making in this process. Potentially it increases critical awareness of the way having people feel 'powerless' creates apathy and allows the status quo to continue. Kieffer (1984, p. 18) argues that these tangible experiences 'provoke the initiation of what ultimately evolves as an empowering response' i.e. engagement in social action. As this program focuses on Kieffer's early stages in the development of empowerment, the role of the facilitator is important.

Part B: Using action research to improve skills in facilitation

This section provides a case study explaining how action research was used to improve my skills in facilitation using the workshop *A Council of All Beings*. It includes a description of the program, *A Council of All Beings*, the role of the facilitator using this program and a brief review of action-research theory.

A council of all beings: A description

The environmental education program, *A Council of All Beings* is based upon the book, *Thinking Like A Mountain,* by Seed, Macy, Fleming and Naess (1988). The program aims to enhance the commitment and resources of people to care and protect the planet Earth. The workshop is presented in four stages; *Mourning, Remembering, Council Gathering* and *Work For The Planet.* The first three stages make use of participants' experiences, simulation games and ritual and to investigate issues about environmental destruction. In the fourth stage participants develop an objective and a strategy for increasing their ability to work for the planet. The facilitation processes and the content of activities that form the workshop are guided by the philosophies of deep ecology, and despair and empowerment theory.

Deep ecology is an environmental philosophy based on the belief that every life form is interconnected, has intrinsic value and an ethical right to develop to its highest potential (Devall and Sessions 1985, Naess

1988, Nash 1989). The content of the activities in *A Council of All Beings* stimulates awareness of these beliefs with the goal of using this increased awareness as a personal resource and a motivator for engagement in action that will defend the environment.

Most of the people who are attracted to *A Council of All Beings* have a genuine commitment for the environment. They participate because they want to revitalise their commitment, or they are looking for ways to motivate others to engage in action projects that will solve environmental problems and/or they feel despair or powerless about what they could do to promote a socially just world.

Macy (1983) argues that many people who are concerned about environmental issues actually suppress a lot of distress and/or despair that blocks their motivation and creativity for solving environmental problems. In the workshop, opportunities are created for people to release some of this distress. Once this distress is released people can harness their strengths and abilities to help solve problems and take control of their lives, i.e. engage in empowering processes (Macy 1983, Seed *et al* 1988). Thus, the program is not about implementing action but reducing the obstacles that hinder people from taking action.

Role of facilitator in *A Council of All Beings*

Seed *et al* (1988, p. 99) argue that the 'leaders' of *A Council of All Beings* require:

> ... a delicate balance ... On the one hand, they offer and orchestrate a preconceived structure and need confidence in it in order to keep the process 'on track'. On the other hand, they must play the role of facilitator with enough humble ordinariness and flexibility to allow people to believe in the naturalness of the process and in expressing themselves genuinely and spontaneously.

In a personal comment to me John Seed (1992) added:

> You need to surrender to the circle. Allow participants to demonstrate their skills and strengths, allow them to teach and lead the group.

These statements support the need to balance leadership and facilitation skills in a group that values democratic processes and respects that each group member has skills to offer. Seed *et al* (1988) also supports the idea of two or more people sharing facilitation. This co-facilitation models sharing of responsibility 'and the synergistic cooperation integral to the ecological perspective' of deep ecology (p. 100).

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Research method: Action research

I chose action research as my method of research because it promotes a process that allows experimentation for improvement of practice. Also, the collaborative aspect of action research could increase the diversity of ideas that may improve my practice. Although this study began with the personal, i.e. practitioner improvement in facilitation it moved to the wider community by addressing the concerns of other people about environmental issues. This meant that researchers and participants would be making changes that would affect others; when this happens action-research is part of a political process and can impact on social change (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988).

The term *action research* was first used by Kurt Lewin in 1946. Lewin wanted to bridge the gap between social theory and social action. He believed that the purpose of research should be to create change and included self review and experimentation in the method (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). Lewin developed the model of learning cycles (described below) with the dual goals of improving the outcomes of practical problem situations and the discovery of basic knowledge about the way people act in their environment (Russell 1987). The cyclic process is a major feature of action research and was an essential part of this study.

Research procedures

The methods of collecting data for this research project included: keeping diaries; making audio tapes with co-facilitators who acted as critical friends; and analysing written and oral evaluations from participants. This process was developed over four cycles of pre-planning, implementation and evaluation. The cyclic processes is outlined below.

Pre-planning: The co-facilitators reviewed the program guidelines as set down in *Thinking Like A Mountain* by Seed *et al* (1988). Diaries were kept of meetings where several problematic issues were discussed and alternative approaches were agreed upon. This stage required several meetings, as solving one problem allowed another to emerge until finally, co-facilitators felt that all foreseeable problems had been addressed and the program was ready to be tested in the field.

Implementation: During the actual workshops the co-facilitators made observations of both the participants' responses and workshop processes. Co-facilitators kept diaries of their observations and reactions. Adult participants made written and oral evaluations of the researcher's facilitation skills and the workshop generally.

Reflection: I made diary entries immediately after each workshop. The co-facilitators met a few days after each workshop to de-brief and reflect. The de-briefing session after the first workshop was recorded on audio-tape because there were so many issues to consider. A detailed summary was made of this session and other de-briefing and reflecting

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meetings.

Revised plan: A revised workshop format was developed after each reflection meeting.

The study

I co-facilitated four one day workshops, two with adult participants and two with primary school children. The co-facilitator for the two adult workshops was a social/group worker and the co-facilitators for the two children's workshops were teachers, one person being involved with both workshops. The workshops were held in Brisbane at an environmental centre, a state primary school and a private house.

Facilitation and environmental education

As the first step in facilitating a series of *A Council of All Beings* workshops, I made an assessment of the program theory and guidelines by comparing them to the objectives of environmental education as set down in the Tbilisi Declaration, an international document that Greenall Gough (1990) argues has guided the development of environmental education since 1977. Although these objectives formed a comparative benchmark, the assessment also considered whether the *A Council of All Beings* encapsulated socially critical or liberal/progressive component of environmental educational ideology. That is, does the program seek to encourage people to challenge the power of the socio-political system and how it impacts on the destruction of the environment, or does it only encourage individuals to develop their strengths and abilities to work for social change by using the existing social systems already in place?

A detailed assessment of this comparison is beyond the scope of this study but is available in Kozak (1992). Briefly, the assessment suggests that *A Council of All Beings* can be regarded as a valuable form of environmental education because it provides opportunities for environmental educators to help people make a link between their awareness of environmental issues and taking action. However, the guidelines in Seed *et al* (1988) and conversation with John Seed and other workshop facilitators indicated that the role of the facilitator was an essential part of the workshop's success. Therefore, I chose to co-facilitate a series of workshops rather than observe workshops facilitated by others because it gave me an opportunity to improve my professional practice as an environmental educator. Thus, the research focused on aspects of facilitation, not the effectiveness of the program to implement social change.

In setting up the workshop format for *A Council of All Beings* the co-facilitators made decisions on behalf of the groups regarding selection of activities and group processes. The objectives of each activity needed to complement the overall aim of the workshop. In pre-planning the co-

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facilitators decided to emphasise to the participants that they would need to determine the level of participation that they wished to explore. The facilitator would only intervene to keep the participants moving productively because of time constraints or to protect group members' self esteem. The facilitator would share the aim of the program and the participants would identify their own goals for each workshop.

Thus, the workshop had a definite structure that was pre-planned to suit the development of the participants. The workshop plan or structure was presented at the beginning of the day and was guided by the ground rules set by the adult participants at each workshop.

Evaluating action research as an approach to professional development

This section describes how the tension between my theory and practice of facilitation diminished during the series of *A Council of All Beings* workshops and associated cycles of planning and reflection. Also, it includes a brief discussion of the effectiveness of action research for improving professional practice as an environmental educator.

Using action research was an effective way to improve my professional skills as an environmental educator. This method allowed for a flexible workshop plan to be designed, implemented, evaluated, and then re-planned. By using the cycles of action research the co-facilitators were able to 'run with' what was prepared and learn from the workshop process rather than delay the implementation of workshops because they felt the preparation was not perfect. The gap that occurred between ideal plan and facilitator's practice diminished as new workshops were implemented.

By collaborating with the co-facilitators/critical friends I was able to use their insights and support to conduct the workshop with a feeling of confidence. Also, critical friends shared their different perspectives about the workshop. Often I was feeling excessively self critical about certain aspects, for example, the children's diminishing interest in the *Council Gathering*. Critical friends, while not denying the outcome, either: a) suggested a likely cause that could be eliminated in future workshops; or b) highlighted successful activities and put the overall workshop in a positive perspective. All the participants, including the children, were aware that they could provide feedback to improve the facilitation of the workshop. The feedback from adults suggested that they were satisfied with the facilitation of the co-facilitators. However, I acted upon the feedback from the participants by making minor modifications to some activities and facilitation techniques in the following workshops. Also, co-facilitators verified transcriptions from my journal and this initiated further discussion and often added new ideas or eliminated doubts and confusions about issues.

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Apart from providing feedback about facilitation issues, participants made 'public' commitments to change an aspect of their lives. However, they tended to focus on personal change that did not obviously affect others. At the same time, their positive disposition at the end of the workshop suggested that they had released some distress and were now able to think more clearly about strategies and action. This was evident by the laughter, friendliness and co-operation during the final stage of the workshop and was encapsulated in evaluation responses of three participants who wrote:

> Yes, it has [changed me] from a point of almost despair. I've discovered that it is possible to make some small difference in the outcome of things.

> [I] Feel less blocked on what else I can do given limitations of time and energy.

> [I] Feel more committed to making changes in my behaviour that have been more 'theoretical' until now.

One of my commitments was to introduce the workshop to the environmental education community of South Africa. I did follow through with this commitment in 1993 and understand that other 'Councils' have been facilitated by South African educators who attended the workshop that I facilitated. Although these outcomes were heartening I cannot make any claims about the impact of the series of workshops and the improvement of my facilitation skills on the broader issue of social change.

Conclusion

This report considered the importance of effective facilitation as a means to enhance empowerment and social action. It also described the successful use of action research to investigate and improve issues about facilitating the program *A Council of All Beings*. The research procedure closely followed the theoretical principles of action research. The cyclic process of action research allowed the co-facilitators to collaborate with participants to improve my facilitation skills. This study has demonstrated how action research can contribute to professional development of environmental educators.

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