What constitutes a good facilitator?

This research was carried out in a Community Development Project which is gender specific to women. The focus of the project is community education, and the majority of adult learners have not completed upper secondary level of education. The age profiles of the participants ranged from thirty to sixty years old and they are exploring FETAC level 4 'Personal and Interpersonal Development'. Most participants of the chosen group have experienced four facilitators over a year on a rota basis and constructivist approaches are used to allow the women themselves to create new knowledge. Therefore they are well informed to answer the research question, *'what constitutes a 'good facilitator/tutor?'*. It is reported in evaluations from our group participants that our learner centred approach to learning is often what sets our methods apart from more traditional approaches. Therefore this research was carried out to pinpoint the aspects of facilitation that inspires our participants to continue their studies with the Women's Centre.

An ethical issue of concern is that the research participants have no control over the data collected. Consequently I agreed a further discussion with feedback when the study was complete. Having discussed the ethical concerns with the group they were informed that they had no obligation to take part in the research. The research group were also given one weeks' notice, which was to facilitate the choice of turning up or not.

The session was designed so that participants would take an active part in the discussion and documentation of the findings. Two volunteers were asked to document the discussion, and there were two reasons for this request. Firstly it would be a more empowering experience to ask participants to help carry out the research, rather than being passive donors of information. The second reason was because of the possibility of missing vital information if data was collected by one person. Consequently I was free to observe the proceedings which allowed the possibility of seeing beyond the words, and having an enhanced opportunity to interpret body language and group dynamic.

Research Findings

The question was put on a white board: '*In your opinion what constitutes a 'good facilitator/tutor'?* The participants who helped document the data, picked up on more rich and valid responses than I might otherwise have done. They documented issues that were particularly relevant to themselves as the researched and identified issues that I may have overlooked. Wheatley (1999) suggests that 'we worry more about the accuracy of small bits of information we have and how best to analyse them, than about the huge amounts of information we lose' (p.66). A large amount of data was generated although it is not within the scope of this study to explore all data here, however a clear picture is given below.

Participants communicated with confidence and appeared comfortable with their knowledge, and discussed the issue almost as 'experts in their field'. I communicated this to them and it was declared "one thing we know a lot about is effective facilitation". There was an element of 'flow' involved, as participants completely ignored their traditional break time and carried on with the conversations. I called attention to their break time several times, however only one cigarette smoker left for a few minutes and had hurried back. Csikszentmihalyi (1992) explores the concept of 'flow' which looks at the issue of task enjoyment bringing about a sense of harmony, which encourages people to complete a task for its own sake. I have no doubt that the initial reason for taking part in the research was to accommodate my wishes. However something else took over (flow, I suspect) as I had all the information I needed within twenty minutes, and yet the conversations continued for ninety minutes. By accommodating further discussion an opportunity was presented to return the favour, particularly since the participants were enjoying the experience.

The findings were collated into three categories: Affective/Attitude Domain, Cognitive/Knowledge Domain and Abilities/Skills according to Bloom (1956) and Anderson & Krathwohl (2001). Therefore according to this research a good facilitator possesses attributes and competencies that fall into the following categories, see Fig. 1.
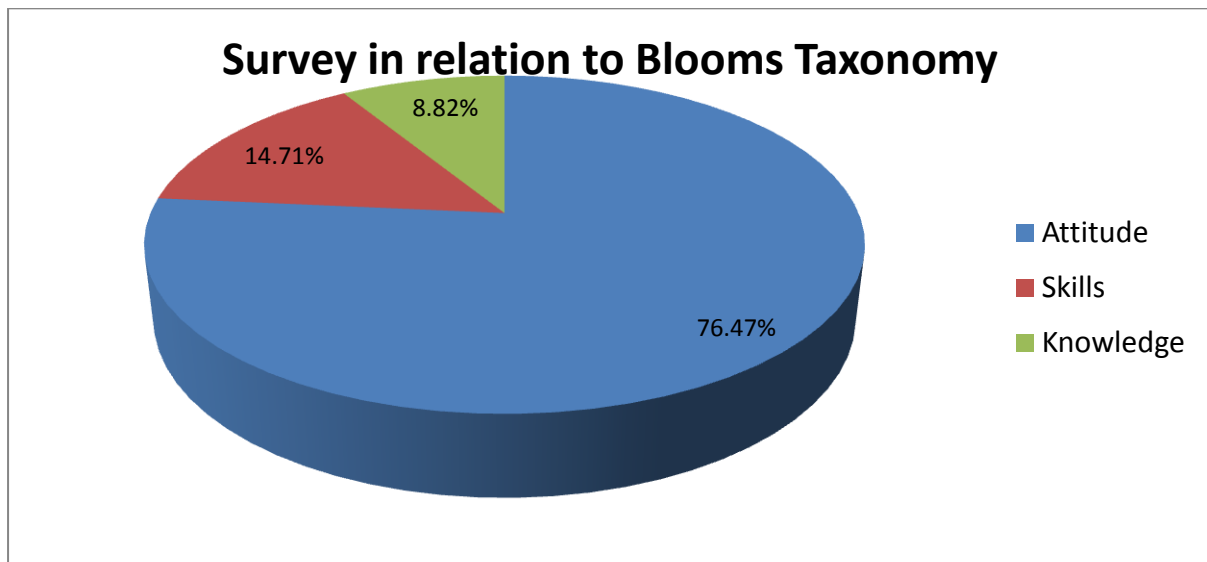
Survey in relation to Blooms Taxonomy

Fig. 1

The research indicates that the affective/attitude dimension was the strongest. There was more focus on the qualities of a facilitator rather than on skills and knowledge. Participants mainly commented on the personal and interpersonal skills of a facilitator. This response corresponded with my predications; however I expected 65% of comments to be of the affective category rather than over 75%.

All of the learners contributed many responses which amounted to 76.47% of comments, which include the following:

- "the facilitator being aware of the good in each person"
- "being non-judgemental"
- "a good facilitator is understanding and shows empathy"
- "I was never listened to before coming here"

These comments suggest that a humanistic approach advocated by Maslow (1956) and Rogers (1977), which looks at human nature positivity and practices positive regard for participants, is valued. Rogers (1977) writes extensively on the importance of empathy and positive regard, and he suggests that empathy is an empowering experience. Active listening is also very important with regards to the research group. It was also reported by participants that many had not experienced being listened to before, perhaps due to prior negative experiences in education or due to gender or class issues.

Many participants referred to a desire for the facilitator to be "genuine or real": this also indicates a reference to the humanistic concept of congruence explored by Rogers (1977) and genuineness reported by Thompson (1999). Thompson (1999) explores how 'people skills' should be incorporated into our very being, rather than just having learned responses. Participants generally are very astute as to when facilitator/tutor is genuine and when they are playing a role. Biggs suggests that rather than just following the general principles of teaching, wise effective teaching '...need adapting to your own personal strengths...' (1999, p.6).

This coincides with other research studies such as the AONTAS (2011) report on the impact of the social action model of community education, which shows 'high rates of learners indicating tutors/facilitators had fostered an affective dimension to the learning...'(p.1). The AONTAS report states that "100% of participating centres indicated that they saw outcomes related to the affective dimension as very important" (2011, p.48). The report also states that 72% of participants named 'the people were really nice' as one of the top factors in facilitating access, and 70% named a welcoming environment. It is evident that a facilitator who exhibits humanistic and affective characteristics is valued by learners. Also a respectful learning environment is particularly necessary for those who have previously had a negative experience of formal education.

Some research participants referred to difficult experiences in formal education and recalled experiences with 'bad teachers' and then suggested the opposite for what constitutes a good facilitator/tutor. For example some participants suggested comments like:

- "someone who would not belittle you"
- "a good facilitator does not talk *at* us all day, she seeks our opinions and values it"

A significant number of participants suggested that their opinions had not being sought in past experiences in education and suggested that it was very empowering to be asked "what do you think?". Thompson (2007) suggests that a key part of empowerment is 'working in partnership' with people, and this involves seeking their opinions. It was reported that when a facilitator asks for an opinion, "an assumption is made that you have a valid opinion and therefore that you matter". It was apparent that the negative experiences in formal education

as children and young adults had a huge impact on the women's lives. Many participants' body language changed when the conversation veered towards past hurts, and held themselves with arms around their bodies. Therefore I enquired if their experience of facilitation at present only appears good, due to comparing it to difficult childhood experiences of education. However some women responded that they also had positive experiences in formal adult education. However they reported it did not compare to their present experiences due to "a lower level of equality, positive regard and little use of varied learning styles". Another woman suggested,

> "I know the difference between being tolerated and being liked, and what I experience here is a sense of being liked with no judgements made, which is what makes a good facilitator".

This comment reinforces my earlier reference of participants knowing when a facilitator is genuine. Also the reference to different learning approaches indicates that the constructivist nature of the facilitation also sets the present experience of facilitation apart from more teacher centred approaches. Brooks and Brooks (1999) explore constructivist approaches that are inclusive and learner centred.

At times during the research it was necessary to bring awareness back to more recent experiences of facilitation. Many women referred positively to our approaches to facilitation which fostered an equal learning environment. A concern for equal power relationships between learners and facilitator was evident for example the following was suggested:

- "sense of fairness"
- "approachable and flexible"
- "a facilitator who values our life experience and asks our opinions"

Brooks and Brooks (1999) suggest that the constructivist teacher seeks student's opinions and values them. It is apparent that the power relationship was of significant importance with regards to outlining what constitutes a good facilitator/tutor. However an African woman suggested that learners should "be made appreciate education". This is a classical conditioned response to constructivist approaches to facilitating. Other learners suggested that at first they also expected the same 'control element' that they experienced previously in education. They also indicated that they *now* value the opportunity to take more responsibility for their own learning. Facilitators are asked to encourage learners to question, enquire, discuss and debate, and take ownership of their learning which is often contrary to their conditioning.

Hence an initial need for unlearning conditioned responses when groups are first formed. The concept of 'ownership is closely linked to effective teaching and learning' (Anderson, Brown and Race, 1998:41).

Many participants spoke with passion about the need for a facilitator to "value their life's experience" and to engage them "actively in learning". This was also apparent in Mitsoni's (2006) research which indicates the importance of keeping the learning close to the lived experience of learners and also actively engaging the learners. Giving greater responsibility to learners was also significant in Mitsoni's research (2006, p.159).

It was interesting to note that the cognitive/knowledge category had the least amount of comments amounting to only 8.82%, which includes the following:

- "A good facilitator is able to think outside the box and be creative"
- "See the bigger picture"
- "a good facilitator has knowledge and understanding"

Some of these comments refer to having knowledge of social analysis which is essential in community work (Towards Standards 2008). Knowledge of social theories is important towards seeing beyond individuals' general dispositions, and recognising how oppression can impact on behaviour and group dynamics. Craft (2008) explores creativity in education and cautions that it should be accompanied by wisdom. Moran (2005) explores practical wisdom and the concept of 'phonesis': he suggests that craft and pedagogical knowledge are 'morally neutral' and therefore should be accompanied by practical wisdom (p.2).

The following comments were categorised in the skills section which amounted to 14.71% of all comments:

- "ability to unlock the potential of learners and actively engage them in learning"
- "a good tutor keeps the learning space safe, and uses different ways of learning"
- "a good facilitator is willing to change direction, and is a good communicator"

These comments identify the need for a good facilitator to use their skills to actively engage learners and foster different learning styles, as well as using their groupwork and facilitation skills to keep the learning environment safe and to enhance participation. My colleagues and I predicted that personal and interpersonal skills would dominate the study, as well as

encouraging participation. The above comments refer to facilitators encouraging participation and engagement which was common throughout the study. It was also reported by the learners that the good facilitator/tutor is someone who is flexible, able to adapt and respond to the needs of the learners. The learners indicated that they had encountered all of the desirable skills of facilitation outlined in the study in the Women's Centre. As one woman said "why do you think that we keep coming here?". Enabling participation, using participatory approaches and being aware of participant's affective needs was widely referred to during the research. A participant's capacity to participate is often taken for granted by dominant discourse. It is argued that it is not enough to provide equal opportunity to participate, it is essential to provide equality of condition for the most disenfranchised sections of our society.

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