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BETWEEN NEUTRALITY AND ACTIVISM: THE ROLE OF FACILITATORS



#facilitator_role

#crisis

#facilitation

#positioning

#active

#neutral

#support_in_thinking

#support_in_practicing

About the author



(Photo Credit: Patryk Grudziński)

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is passionate about social and ecological transformation, about people and nature. He works onsite, outside, and online as a facilitator in education for sustainable development, international co-creation, and citizenship education. Currently, he is involved in fostering sustainable

development, climate actions, and social-ecological transformation at [Villa Fohrde](#), a certified educational house in Brandenburg, Germany. Before that, he worked at the international NGO MitOst, at Heidelberg University, and for the German Parliament. Sebastian holds degrees in nature conservation and regional development (MSc) and European Studies (MA). As a facilitator, he has cooperated with diverse organizations such as the European Green Foundation, horizontal school, Goethe-Institut, FU Berlin, and the German-Polish Youth Association. Sebastian enjoys hiking, exploring nature, and spending time with family and friends in Brandenburg, the Caucasus and the Alps. He is a co-founder and supporter of two seminar houses in Armenia and Georgia.

We are living in times of crisis. A crisis is defined by the fact that the situation that occurs after its passing significantly differs from the situation before its beginning.¹ Looking back on history, this is not a new phenomenon. The industrial revolution, colonization, two world wars, and the collapse of the Soviet Union also brought about immense changes in the lives of millions. These days, it is a human-made climate crisis, the mass extinction of species, and the Russian war against Ukraine. Crises are often accompanied by a redefining of different social roles, such as the role of a citizen, a parent, an employer, a teacher, and also that of a facilitator.²

What is the (new) role of facilitators in this crisis?

To be more precise: Can facilitators afford to remain neutral when facing all these challenges, or should they rather take an active stance and thus work as activists? Or should it be the other way around: Do we (especially now) need neutral facilitators to bring people of different opinions together and support the building of bridges?

These questions are the focus of this article.

¹ R. Koselleck, "Krise," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* [Historical basic concepts], vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 637-641.

² Caroline Grabensteiner and Nina Grünberger, "Die Vielfältigen Gesichter von Bildung in Der Postdigitalen Postpandemie," *Journal Für Politische Bildung* 12, no. 3 (September 5, 2022): 26-31, <https://doi.org/10.46499/1930.2467>.

What's the role of a facilitator?

There are different theories and schools of facilitation and there are also different understandings and definitions of the term facilitation. One well-known definition comes from an American facilitator, organizational development consultant and author Sam Kaner. According to his definition, the facilitator's job is "to sup-

port everyone to do their best thinking and practice. To do this, the facilitator encourages full participation, promotes mutual understanding and cultivates shared responsibility."³

In educational contexts, citizenship education included, a facilitator follows people during a learning process in which they develop competencies in a self-responsible way. She/he acts in a horizontal learning setting (→ See the article "What is horizontal learning?" by Marta Gawinek-Dagargulia and Maria Tymoshchuk)



Fig. 1: Different roles in facilitation.

³ Sam Kaner et al., *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* (Wiley, 2007), 32.

⁴ Douglas Champion, David Kiel and Jean McLendon, "Choosing a Consulting Role Source: Principles and Dynamics of Matching Role to Situation", ed. Alan Fowler and Jan Ubels, in *Capacity Development in Practice* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2010).

in which people learn from each other through participatory methods as equal. The facilitator holds space, structures the learning process, provides inputs and, if needed, supports the group by navigating through complexities. The participants learn from each other and are co-responsible for the learning process. Depending on the needs of the group, the purpose of the event, and their own skills, the facilitator can assume different roles during an event, such as that of a moderator, expert, guide, observer, coach, or sometimes

even a team member (see fig. 1). Being aware of the purpose of the event, the organizational framework, and the needs of the groups, facilitators decide which role to assume in a particular meeting and communicate it in a transparent manner.

Taking these different roles of a facilitator into account, there are good arguments for both suggested options: acting neutral and expressing a personal point of view. Let's take a closer look at some arguments for both positions.

Benefits of a neutral facilitator

While trust is important in every learning setting, it is especially true for horizontal learning, because it's based on partnership relations between learners and facilitators. To enable this trust and to allow a deep level of learning, a safe space is needed. **The facilitator is open to hearing participants' feedback and accepts their feelings and emotions without judgment.** When they are critical, the facilitator doesn't judge their statements as "wrong" or "bad," but is ready to understand the needs behind the behavior, the reason for dissatisfaction. A neutral position can help participants to be more open and honest about their thoughts and to talk more freely about them.

A neutral attitude helps to create a rather flat hierarchy between the facilitator and participants. However, wanted or not, compared to other members of the group, the facilitator still has an outstanding and a more powerful role in the group. This implies the risk of misusing power and overpowering participants. In the context of citizenship education, the Beutelsbach Consensus **prohibits overpowering learners with any kind of opinion**, because this would be indoctrination. According to the fundamental principles of democracy and respect for human rights, controversial matters in science and politics need to be treated as such, meaning that different perspectives need to be presented. The teacher or facilitator encourages learners to develop their own opinions. By consciously taking a neutral position, the facilitator will most likely not override the learners with their own opinion – even

though she/he has one. To avoid misunderstanding, this is no carte blanche for discrimination and intolerance, because the environment must always remain in line with democratic principles and respect for human rights.

We can argue that in a world of multiple crises and too many people who offer clear, simplistic, and often contradictory answers to the challenges, **there is a need for neutral spaces where people with different opinions can come together.** With regards to the climate crisis, there are, on one side, citizens who are afraid of losing their standard of living through higher taxes for energy and other political reforms and, on the other, there are those who argue for economic degrowth to avoid climate collapse. If people come from such different poles, a neutrally positioned facilitator can be in a unique position to gain the trust of both sides, build bridges, and develop a compromise that works for all. In this sense, neutral facilitators can also play an important role in dealing with polarization in societies.

The value of a neutral position as a facilitator is also reflected in the following case from Poland:

“During the pandemic and remote education, tensions between students and teachers due to the new rules of online classrooms were frequent in Polish schools. The transition to the online world was sudden, without preparation, and took many hours per day. Teachers imposed netiquette, which included, among others, an obligation to turn on the camera and sound. This was met with strong resistance from the students and caused great frustration among the teachers. At the Foundation, we facilitated a meeting to help solve this problem in a constructive way that builds relationships. We used dialogue and empathic communication approaches to help both groups better understand each other and see why they do what they do. They explored the real needs behind teachers forcing students to activate the cameras and students avoiding being seen by everyone the whole time, and were asked to name their emotions. We used methods for participatory decision-making like empathetic communication, decision mapping, and consent to help groups find a good solution for all. After the meetings, there was no sense of strong polarization, but rather understanding of the situation of others and honest talking about their values and needs.”

(Marta Gawinek-Dagargulia, AktywniejWsi program, Galician Foundation of Development and Education)

Benefits of a facilitator with an active stance

On the other hand, there are also good arguments for facilitators to take on the role of the activist.

As described at the beginning of the article, facilitators should be able to take on different roles. However, no matter how hard one tries, **as a human being, it is not always possible to be neutral.** Everybody has their own experiences, knowledge and views – glasses through which they see the world. Considering that, neutrality is an illusion and it is rather dangerous to strive for it. More importantly, facilitators need to be aware of their “glasses,” be transparent about them and facilitate authentically from this standpoint.

Furthermore, when facing the multiple, fundamental crises mentioned at the beginning of the article, **one cannot afford to be neutral.** Wars or the mass extinction of species won't be stopped by neutral persons, but by those who take an active position, address the challenges, offer solutions, and act upon them. This need to act in a dire situation calls for as many people as possible, no matter if they are activists, politicians, or facilitators.

Referring to Sam Kaner, Natalya Trambovetska, a facilitator and learning supervisor from Ukraine, sees a facilitator as a person who brings cultural change: “In a sense, this is activism. The actual task of the facilitator is to promote certain communication models, ways of interaction, new thinking skills and attitudes in order to facilitate the process of achieving

a result. Therefore, **the added value of facilitation is the introduction of change.** Otherwise, we can talk about moderation, for example.”

To put it into a learning context of citizenship education: Neutrality from being afraid to take a stand, or because it's more comfortable to say that there are always two sides of the same coin (for example in a conflict or even war between two countries), is too easy. **Facilitators should allow themselves to feel afraid and be vulnerable to participants' reactions: This is human. But they also need to have the courage to think things through and form their emotional position and share it.** This includes the risk of being wrong and admitting it. It is an authentic process that can encourage learners to critically reflect on their positions. So, it is important to ask where taking a neutral position comes from: from not knowing enough, from being afraid of being wrong, because it is a part of the doctrine of the ruling government or because it serves the purpose of the learning encounter?

During seminars and trainings, different opinions and controversial discussions are necessary and fruitful for the learning process. **If the difference in opinions comes from not knowing scientifically proven facts, replacing facts with judgments, or not understanding cause-and-effect relationships, the facilitator has a duty to take an active position.** In that case, maintaining neutrality would mean adding fuel to the fire of post-truth or violent narratives. More concretely, during a seminar, one can discuss ways of dealing with the climate crisis but not whether a human-made climate crisis exists, since it is a scientifically proven fact.

How do we deal with the roles between neutrality and activism?

There are good arguments for both a neutral and an active role of a facilitator. Full neutrality, as it should have become clear by now, is not always possible; however, facilitators should not act purely as activists, either. In the end, it comes back to the different roles we are stepping into as facilitators. The real question is not about neutrality or activism, but about the balance that is needed in each (particular) situation. This is underlined by **Andrea Wilke**, who works as a facilitator and coach in the field of Education for Sustainable Development:

“Depending on the topic and the group, I alternately move from several points of view in different roles, to the right extent, at the right moment.

As a systemically moderating facilitator, I promote the connection between people and nature as sources of strength.

As an accompanying coach, I emphasize individual, important values and effective strengths of the participants in order to enable them to act individually and together.

As a personality, I want to be a role model for sustainability with my own resources, with a stable inner attitude and flexible behavior that enables constant adjustments

to rapidly changing living conditions.”

Mike Waldron, facilitator and contemporary artist from Manchester, also sees this balance between different roles:

„I think as a facilitator, I have always felt that I have a role as an honest broker. In that regard I should strive for balance, but I do not seek neutrality. I see myself as an equal part of any temporary community I join to facilitate. I will not impose my ideas, but will share them, and offer opinions.”

Against the background of different arguments and voices of facilitators, my conclusion is: being aware that one cannot be neutral as a human being, a facilitator should be able to offer a fair space for different opinions, persons, and experiences. This space needs to be based on the principles of democracy, human rights, and sustainability. Facilitators need to be transparent and authentic about their role and values. This calls for the willingness to adjust one’s role as needed. While sometimes one encounter calls for a more neutral position, another one would benefit more from encouragement and the facilitator assuming a proactive role.

The ability to strike an appropriate balance is part of the art of facilitation.

It helps one to become a better facilitator. And, hopefully, it contributes to addressing multiple challenges in this ever-changing world.

References & Resources

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