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## **The Many Co-operative Roles Available to Workshop Co-Facilitators**

George M Jacobs

James Cook University Singapore

[george.jacobs@gmail.com](mailto:george.jacobs@gmail.com)

Peter Seow

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

[peter.seow@nie.edu.sg](mailto:peter.seow@nie.edu.sg)

## **The Many Roles Available to Workshop Co-Facilitators**

### **Abstract**

This paper argues that workshop co-facilitators should be actively involved in planning, conducting and debriefing the workshops in which they are involved. The paper discusses 12 possible roles for workshop co-facilitators and attempts to motivate some of these roles with reference to Humanistic Psychology, Social Interdependence Theory, Socio-Cultural Theory and Social Constructionism. The co-facilitator roles are planning the workshop, befriending participants and facilitators, providing general and technical assistance, modelling behaviours and tasks, observing workshop processes, participating alongside participants, correcting and clarifying what facilitators have said and done, sharing their own and participants' ideas, assessing the workshop's effectiveness and understudying the facilitator.

### **Introduction**

Students in classrooms can benefit when additional teachers enter their classrooms to help the main classroom teacher. Similarly, participants in workshops can benefit when the workshop has co-facilitators helping the workshops' main facilitator. However, too often, the potential benefits of having co-facilitators are not achieved, as the co-facilitators are limited to menial roles, such as distributing handouts and giving directions to the restrooms. The purpose of this paper is to suggest and explain a variety of more substantive roles that co-facilitators can play. These roles are informed four Education theories - Humanistic Psychology, Social Interdependence Theory, Socio-Cultural Theory and Social Constructionism – and by the authors' experiences and reflections.

### **Theoretical Insights into the Roles of Co-Facilitators**

When considering roles for workshop co-facilitators, insights from Humanistic Psychology (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1957) focus attention on participants' emotions, in particular, whether participants feel cared for. Feeling cared for includes such variables as whether participants feel a sense of emotional security, whether they feel a sense of belonging, whether they feel respected and whether they feel engaged and inspired by the workshops' activities and the overall atmosphere at the workshops. Higginbotham & Myler (2010) suggest that the best way for workshop facilitators and co-facilitators (hereafter, the workshop team) to show that they care for participants lies in planning and carrying out well designed and executed workshops.

When focusing on group dynamics in considering roles of workshop co-facilitators, insights from Social Interdependence Theory (Johnson & Johnson, 2006) can be useful. This theory looks at how group members, such as groups of workshop participants, view each other. Do they feel as though their outcomes are positively correlated with the outcomes of fellow participants (positive interdependence), negatively correlated (negative

interdependence) or not correlated (no interdependence). In other words, do they want to help the other participants succeed in achieving their goals? Many workshops feature group activities and other opportunities for peer interaction. If the workshop team can successfully encourage participants to feel positively interdependent with their groupmates and others, these peer interaction opportunities are likely to be more productive and enjoyable.

Socio-Cultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) explains that learning is social and that language plays a crucial role in learning. Therefore, Socio-Cultural Theory fits well with Humanistic Psychology's emphasis on belonging and with Social Interdependence Theory's attention to group dynamics. Two concepts from Socio-Cultural Theory's emphasis on the social nature of learning that can inform the efforts of workshop co-facilitators are zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding. The ZPD draws the workshop team's attention to whether workshop tasks are sufficiently challenging so as to engage participants yet not so challenging as to be beyond participants' capabilities even with support from the workshop team and fellow participants. Scaffolding is the support provided to participants and then gradually removed as participants' capabilities, alone and in tandem with peers, increase. This scaffolding can be done not only by teachers, but also by peers.

Social Constructionism (Lave & Wenger, 1991) depicts the process by which ideas, artifacts and practices arise, take shape, change shape and, sometimes, are discarded in the crucible of social interaction. Whereas the typical workshop features a solitary workshop facilitator, co-facilitators bring the possibility of more minds focusing on how to enhance the experiences of current and future workshop participant. Yes, participants' input can also play profound roles in enhancing workshop effectiveness; however, too often, facilitator-participant communication suffers from a short time span and lack of two way communication. Thus, co-facilitators, the other members of the workshop team, may be facilitators' best hope for ongoing input.

## **Roles for Co-Facilitators**

The main section of this paper presents roles that workshop co-facilitators might play.

### **1. Planning the workshop**

Successful workshops often require many hours of planning. In the spirit of Social Constructionism, this planning may be more fruitful when done in coordination with co-facilitators who bring their unique experiences and perspectives to the task. Furthermore, co-facilitators frequently have greater skills than facilitators in particular areas, such as preparing engaging Powerpoint presentations.

Co-facilitators should also be involved in planning the workshop, because they function best when they are involved in planning and rehearsal thereby enhancing their feeling of ownership and their big picture understanding of the workshop. This planning includes deciding on and practicing the roles the co-facilitators will play, including the division of labour if there are multiple co-facilitators. For example, each co-facilitator might be responsible for a particular group / groups of participants.

### **2. Befriending participants**

Often, workshop participants do not know each other, or even if they are acquainted, they do not have a strong working relationship. Therefore, when, as is often the case, participants form groups, group members lack rapport. This hinders feelings of belonging highlighted by Humanist Psychology. Ice-breaking / teambuilding activities seek to address this. To supplement such activities, co-facilitators can introduce themselves to participants and initiate conversations, either of the chit-chat variety or more focused on workshop content. These introductions and conversations can happen before the workshop begins,

during breaks, after the workshop, as well as during activities and even in the days and months after the workshop.

One aspect of how co-facilitators befriend workshop participants is what the Humanist psychologist Carl Rogers (1961, p. 283) called “unconditional positive regard”, i.e., regardless of who participants may be, regardless of their performance in the workshop or their attitude towards the workshop, the workshop team continues to treat the participants in a welcoming, respectful manner. Another way of putting this is represented in the popular adage, “People don’t care what you know until they know that you care”.

High expectations forms another aspect of positive regard. By displaying high expectations for workshop participants, the workshop team fosters an atmosphere that encourages everyone at the workshop to see themselves as part of a large team, a team devoted to promoting the common goals of the workshop. For instance, in the case of workshops for teachers, those goals might be enhancing use of technology, encouraging cooperation among students or promoting thinking skills. If everyone in the room embraces those goals, the workshop no longer belongs to the workshop team. Instead, everyone adopts the motto of The Three Musketeers: “All for one; one for all”. In other words, in the spirit of Social Interdependence Theory, everyone feels positively interdependent, i.e., their outcomes are positively correlated, and everyone needs to do their job during and after the workshop for everyone’s mutual goals to be achieved. Facilitators need to lead the workshop (both as it unfolds during its scheduled time and as it unfolds in practice back at participants’ workplaces), co-facilitators need to help with that and participants need learn, develop and apply the ideas explored at the workshop.

### 3. Befriending the workshop facilitator

Ripp (2010) describes teaching as a lonely profession, and her words can apply to workshop facilitators, as well. Palonsky (1986) likens teachers to entertainers, except that teachers (and workshop facilitators) not only have to keep their audiences entertained, they also need to provide audiences with ideas and techniques that can produce results back in their workplaces. In the face of this pressure to entertain and inform, plus the stress of staring out at a room full of unfamiliar faces, it is small wonder that workshop facilitators might feel lonely. Thus, the belonging that Humanistic Psychology discusses can also be a need for facilitators, and the familiar presence of the co-facilitators, people with whom facilitators enjoy a feeling of positive interdependence, can be comforting. It is nice to have someone there to gently inform facilitators that part of their breakfast is still decorating their upper lip or to kindly assure a facilitator that the workshop can succeed despite the fact that s/he forgot to bring the new version of the PowerPoint presentation which the workshop team had spent the whole night preparing. At the same time, facilitators should resist the temptation to spend break time, lunch time, etc. solely with co-facilitators, and should instead seek to make new friends with participants.

#### 4. Providing general assistance

Co-facilitators can play a crucial role in implementing the two concepts from Socio-Cultural Theory explained above: zone of proximal development and scaffolding. By providing assistance to participants, such as further explaining a concept or helping with a task, co-facilitators make what might otherwise be beyond participants' abilities into something they can learn to do and learn by doing. Here, the key often lies in how co-facilitators assist participants. The temptation to do for participants must be resisted. Instead, despite the omnipresent press of time, co-facilitators must guide students to help themselves or to learn from peers. The slogan should be, "Give people a bowl of rice, and they eat for a

day. Teach them to grow rice, and they eat for a lifetime”. Thus, co-facilitators should be careful that participants do not depend too much on them. Some ideas for scaffolding are:

- a. When using electronic devices, participants, not co-facilitators, operate the devices
- b. Participants are encouraged to think aloud as they do tasks, so that they, groupmates and co-facilitators understand what they are thinking
- c. Rather than telling participants what to do, co-facilitators use questions to help them discover what to do.
- d. If co-facilitators do part of a task for participants, the task is then done a second time, this time by the participants on their own.

In this same “guide on the side” spirit, co-facilitators want to avoid becoming the centre of attention, or to occupy that space for as short a time as possible. One guideline to use here is “3+1 B4 T”, i.e., when facing difficulties, participants should first seek help from their three groupmates. If groupmates are unable to provide sufficient assistance, participants should seek out one more group before (B4) turning to a co-facilitator.

A benefit of the assistance co-facilitators provide workshop participants is that by supplying one-to-one or one-to-a-few assistance to workshop participants, co-facilitators significantly reduce the burden on the main facilitators’ shoulders. Of course, in a well-designed workshop, based on a thorough needs analysis and careful selection of participants, less on-the-spot assistance will be needed, but such ideal preparation seldom occurs. Along similar lines, co-facilitators can integrate late coming participants into the flow of the workshop.

## 5. Providing technical assistance



Participants may need help with such equipment as computers, digital pens, origami paper and games. This technical assistance is a specialised case of scaffolding. Even with the clearest directions from the facilitator, some individual participants or groups may require such technical, rather than content, assistance. Heterogeneously grouping participants based on their ability with various equipment, such as forming groups based on familiarity with the software being used in the workshop, can reduce but may not eliminate the need for co-facilitator assistance. Without such assistance, valuable time can be lost, or some workshop participants may fall far behind others.

## 6. Modeling

Co-facilitators can engage in another form of scaffolding by modelling the behaviours that the workshop team hopes to see in participants. These behaviours include showing interest in workshop activities and in what is being said and what appears on the screen, whiteboard, etc., for instance, laughing at the facilitator's jokes even when hearing them for the 15<sup>th</sup> time. In addition to modelling positive behaviours, co-facilitators can also seek to avoid negative behaviours, such as engaging in excessive side conversations and too often using their electronic devices, such as phones, for non-workshop activities.

Another way that co-facilitators can model involves demonstrating activities. Often, workshop activities are more successful if participants have seen a live demonstration. Co-facilitators can perform this role by modelling for the entire room to witness or for individual groups. Sometimes, both positive and negative demonstrations can be useful. Also, demonstrations can be narrated to highlight key points; for example, co-facilitators can think aloud as they go about a task.

## 7. Observing

Facilitators often have difficulty monitoring what is going on with each participant and group of participants. Are participants understanding what is being examined in the workshop? What do they find easy and difficult? Have they completed the task at hand? If so, have they done the task in a thorough, not a cursory, manner? Is more time needed? For instance, often an individual or group finishes before others, because they did not do the task in a thorough manner. Indeed, a quick finish may mean little higher order thinking. For example, more proficient group members might finish a task and rather than explaining to their peers, they might let peers copy their work.

Such observational data are vital to the workshop team's social construction of the workshop as it unfolds during the event and as it is rethought during the team's reflection process afterwards. As co-facilitators are less occupied with the actual running of the workshop, they are better able to be the eyes and ears of the workshop team, unobtrusively observing how participants interact with the workshop input and activities.

## 8. Participating

In addition to observing, co-facilitators can also participate alongside participants for all or part of the workshop. This arrangement has a few advantages. One, a participant may need a partner for group activities. Two, by playing the role of workshop participant, co-facilitators gain a different perspective on the workshop and, thus, may be better able to assess the quality of the workshop. Participating co-facilitator can demonstrate enthusiasm for topics and activities, as well as modelling how tasks are to be done and responding to the facilitator's request for input from participants.

## 9. Correcting and clarifying

Workshop facilitators make mistakes, forget what they wanted to say and speak too quickly or too softly. Here, in the spirit of positive interdependence, co-facilitators can step into to keep the workshop on track. Often, participants may be reticent to go directly to the facilitators to point out what might be facilitator errors, to ask questions or raise concerns. Co-facilitators, perhaps due to the more personal contact with participants as well as to their physical proximity to participants may be a more approachable sounding board for participants.

#### 10. Sharing ideas

When participants engage in workshop tasks, how can their ideas and products be shared with participants elsewhere in the room? One way of doing this sharing involves groups of two, three or four members sharing with other groups, which has the benefit of promoting peer interaction. Additionally, one group or individual can be asked to share with the entire room. One potential fault with both those sharing methods arises when one person or group has developed a particularly good idea that would be useful to share with everyone. How can that gem be found? One facilitator will have difficulty finding it, but the presence of co-facilitators increases the chances that a precious idea will be unearthed, shared, polished and put to use. Furthermore, co-facilitators can share their own experiences and reflections on workshop topics.

#### 11. Assessing

Just as classroom instruction benefits from frequent formative assessment (Stiggins, 2005), so too do workshop sessions. Many workshops conclude with a brief form of summative assessment. While not without value, such summative assessment has weaknesses. One, at the end of a workshop, participants may be tired and eager to go home, resulting in only cursory attention to the assessment. Two, participants may see little value

for themselves in an assessment instrument completed too late to be of benefit to them. Three, the numerical and short answer formats typical of such instruments may not supply clear feedback. Four, participants' responses on such instruments may be clouded by their personal feelings towards facilitators.

Thus, formative assessment at a workshop can provide a more timely, more informative addition to summative modes of feedback. As mentioned above in the section of co-facilitators' observer role, this formative assessment greatly benefits from the extra pairs of eyes and ears provided by the co-facilitators who are there on the ground, not up at the front of the room, observing the workshop in real time. This formative assessment is focused on improving the workshop. Co-facilitators can record their observations and insights for later use, such as during a break or at a post-workshop debrief session, when the workshop team can meet to decide if changes might be useful.

## 12. Understudying

Often, facilitators play the lead role in a workshop due to their greater experience, expertise or reputation. However, the hope is that co-facilitators will learn from planning, observing and evaluating repeated iterations of the workshop, thereby preparing them to take on the lead role in future workshops. One scaffolded way to facilitate this is for co-facilitators to start by doing just a small part of the workshop, perhaps sharing the lead role with the facilitator. In other cases, the facilitators and co-facilitators may swap places in subsequent workshops or even different portions of the same workshop. In these cases, what is being understudied consists more of the pedagogy of the workshop, rather than the content.

Final note: At workshops, it is often the case that some participants substantially exceed their fellow participants in terms of background on some or all of the workshop topics. In such

cases, these more knowledgeable participants may be able to play some of the co-facilitator roles described above.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the purpose of this paper has been to promote a larger role for co-facilitators in the conception, execution and assessment of workshops. The paper began with brief explanations of four theories that provide ideas for roles that co-facilitators might play. Then, 12 possible roles were explained. Unfortunately, resources in terms of time and money mean that having workshop co-facilitators is often seen as not viable. The hope is that if co-facilitators play some of the roles explained in this paper, people will more fully appreciate their potential benefits and, thus, be more willing to devote the necessary resources to making co-facilitators a more regular part of workshops.





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#### Authors' Bios:

George M Jacobs has facilitated many workshops, mostly on cooperative/collaborative learning, as well as on such topics as language arts, multiple intelligences, educational psychology, extensive reading and action research. He has taught courses and workshops for a wide variety of teachers and students. Since 1993, George has been based in Singapore, where he has had the pleasure of teaching for such institutions as the Ministry of Education, the National Institute of Education, James Cook University and the Center for American Education.



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