

Aesthetics of Facilitation: Cultivating Teacher Leadership

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As teacher learning groups become more prevalent as vehicles for instructional improvement and school change, skilled facilitation of such groups becomes increasingly important. Facilitation, as a core function of teacher leadership, is recognized as a demanding and complex practice. This study investigates how facilitators conceptualize facilitation practice. The authors interviewed 10 experienced facilitators of teacher groups. Drawing on theories of aesthetic leadership, they identified four dimensions of facilitation: affective awareness, embodied knowing, responsive design, and authentic engagement. Each dimension encompasses the facilitator's simultaneous outward, or other-directed, and inward, or self-reflective, orientations. The authors consider how this framework, and, in particular, greater emphasis on the inward orientation, may serve as a resource for critical self-reflection in the development of teacher leaders' facilitation practice.

Keywords: teacher leadership; facilitation; aesthetics

Introduction

Definitions of teacher leadership encompass a wide range of functions and roles within the school, from coordination and management to curriculum development to professional development of colleagues (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leaders influence other teachers in myriad ways, both formally and informally, including modeling, collaboration, coaching, fostering collegial relationships, and advocacy (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; Harris & Muijs, 2005; Lambert, 2003; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2009). Despite this multiplicity of roles and functions, there is broad agreement that teacher leadership should be defined primarily in relation to its capacity to improve instructional practice within schools (Crowther, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008).

In particular, teacher leadership is associated with teachers' professional learning, as opposed to, for example, management roles within the school (Frost & Durrant, 2003). As Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster, & Cobb (1995) declare: "teacher leadership is inextricably connected to teacher learning" (89). Breidenstein, Fahey, Glickman, and Hensley (2012) identify "self-authoring learning" as a critical leadership stance, emphasizing that teachers themselves are sources of knowledge for instructional improvement and school change, as well as leaders in achieving these goals.

Facilitation of teachers' learning has been recognized as an essential condition for instructional improvement and school reform (Lieberman & Mace, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). The use of teacher learning groups has become a prevalent strategy for teachers' professional learning in schools at every level, nationally and internationally (Sargent & Hannum, 2009; Stoll et al., 2006; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). These groups include grade-level

teams and academic departments, as well as inquiry groups, professional learning communities (“PLCs”), and others. Typically, teachers themselves facilitate the groups.

The association of teacher leadership with facilitation of teacher learning groups is evident in frameworks for teacher leadership skills and dispositions. In a study of teacher leaders, Lowery-Moore, Latimer, and Villate (2016) found that “participating in and conducting meetings” was considered central to self-perceptions of leadership style (10). A recent framework of teacher leadership competencies (National Education Association, National Board of Teaching Standards, & Center for Teaching Quality, 2018) specifies evidence for the group process dimension of its overarching competencies (at the highest level): “Create new groups or using existing groups and facilitate those groups to overcome challenges and engage diverse opinions and experiences to meet objectives, solve problems, and achieve desired outcomes” (17).

Facilitation is also recognized as critical to the effective use of discussion protocols, commonly used to structure teacher groups’ meetings (Allen & Blythe, 2015; Easton, 2009; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2013). The absence of skilled facilitation has been associated with weak learning outcomes of teacher learning groups, even for those using discussion protocols to focus and structure meetings (Little & Curry, 2009).

As facilitation of teacher learning groups becomes more important within the professional life of schools, the necessity for understanding its dimensions only increases. Existing conceptualizations of facilitation have highlighted the facilitator’s goals, commitments, and values, as well as specific strategies (“moves”) a facilitator may employ in working with a group. They have not explored the dynamic of how the facilitator himself or herself thinks, feels, makes sense, etc., as he or she interacts with the group, thus begging the question: how is the facilitator attentive, at any given moment, to what is going on with him/herself and the group? Such questions connect facilitation to understandings of teacher leadership as “a stance or way of thinking and being, rather than a set of behaviors” (Hunzicker, 2017, 1).

In this study, we analyze the perspectives of ten experienced facilitators in order to understand how facilitators conceptualize their facilitation practices. As an analytical framework, aesthetic leadership, with its interest in both the form of an event, such as a teacher group meeting, and myriad ways that event may be experienced by leader and followers, provides resources for a dynamic model for facilitation. That model attends both to external conversation of the facilitator with participants and the internal conversation with himself or herself, in other words, how the facilitator is thinking, feeling, and making sense of the group’s activity.

We draw upon theories of aesthetic leadership to develop a framework for facilitation as aesthetic leadership. In doing so, we contribute to an understanding of facilitation as a complex leadership practice, in particular, one that integrates the facilitator’s inward- and outward-facing orientations. Our goal is to provide resources for facilitators’ self-reflection on their own practice to develop their facilitation—and, thus—leadership.¹

¹ The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions to this study of: Beth Delforge, Alan Dichter, Terra Lynch, Miriam Raider-Roth, Marlene Roy, Joseph Schmidt, Debra Smith, Joan Soble, Gene Thompson-Grove, and Daniel Wilson.

Theoretical Framework

Facilitation is often represented as the enactment of a set of strategies, or moves, that will forward a group's agenda or achieve its stated goals, for example, "eliciting, highlighting, probing, steering" (Ebby & Oettinger, 2013). However, researchers and practitioners of group facilitation have long recognized that facilitation is not merely a set of technical skills. Rather, it represents a complex activity that engages cognitive, social, emotional, and ethical dimensions.

These dimensions are evident in frameworks for facilitation. For example, Heron (1999) identifies six dimensions of facilitation: planning, meaning, structuring, confronting, feeling, and valuing. McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald (2013) identify three "core tasks" for facilitation: promoting participation, ensuring equity, and building trust. Schwarz, Davidson, Carlson, & McKinney (2005) describe core values of facilitators, highlighting commitment to valid information, free and informed choice, internal commitment, and compassion. The former two values relate to how the facilitator shares information and makes decisions; the latter two to an ethos of mutual responsibility within the group and suspension of judgment on the facilitator's part. While each framework points, in at least some of its dimensions, to the facilitator's affective or emotional engagement during his or her work with the group, none investigates how the facilitator's internal capacities (feelings, thoughts, emotions, etc.) constantly interact with his or her external engagement with the group.

Theories of aesthetic leadership are particularly well suited to investigate facilitation as a complex, multidimensional activity. Grounded in sensory and experiential phenomena (Taylor & Hansen, 2005), aesthetic leadership integrates attention to design or structure; social interaction; and ethical considerations—all of which affect the facilitator and are enacted by the facilitator in supporting the learning of peers. Drawing upon aesthetic leadership theory allows us to escape narrow conceptions of facilitation as a technical or structural activity, and instead contributes to a more robust understanding of how experienced facilitators enact and reflect upon their practice.

Formulations of aesthetic leadership have long addressed "the artistry of leadership." Such conceptions have tended to focus on the performance of the individual leader in productively bringing together individuals, often referencing aesthetics in the service of developing more "charismatic" leaders (Duke, 1986). English (2008) similarly emphasizes the performance of the leader, describing educational leadership as an art "because it involves the purposive construction of self" (5). Ladkin (2008) adopts the category of "the beautiful" from classical philosophy as a basis for leadership practice, elaborating classical definitions of beauty to include an emphasis on fitness of purposes, mastery, and an emphasis on ethical behavior.

English and Ehrich (2016), in a comparative study of educational leaders and artists, adopt Eisner's (2012) epistemic frames for the value of art, to develop a connoisseurship model for educational leadership. Their model includes dimensions related to ethics, creativity and imagination, and emotion and intuition. Similarly, Polat and Öztoprak-Kavak (2011) offer a scale for aesthetic leadership that highlights aesthetic communication, aesthetic approach, aesthetic application, and other dimensions of the individual leader's performance.

Wood (2005) cautions against “individualistic,” or trait-centric definitions of leadership, that is, those that identify “certain ‘essential’ qualities, capabilities, and that can be quantified, measured, and developed” (1102). English (2008) too differentiates “roles” of the artful leader from the more limiting category of “traits.” Samier, Bates, and Stanley (2006) similarly critique the conceptualization of aesthetic leadership as purely a “mechanism through which the understanding and effectiveness of the educational leader might be enhanced.” Instead, they call for attention to the “educational responsibilities” of leaders “in playing their role in the social drama” of schools (11). This shifts leadership theory from a tight focus on the individual leader to a consideration of leadership within forms of social interactions (Samier, 2011).

For Hansen, Ropo & Sauer (2007), the focus for leadership research is a “search for subjective qualities constructed in interaction between leader and follower which allow for social influence. [...] Aesthetic inquiry attempts to capture the felt meaning various events and interactions have for leaders and followers alike” (555). Elsewhere, the authors relate aspects of dance, including gaze, rhythm, and space, to a paradigm in which leadership is co-constructed between the leader and the followers” (Ropo & Sauer, 2008, 560). This is consistent with views of organizational aesthetics as “constant, collective, social negotiation [within] everyday work in organizations” (Strati, 2010, 886).

In her review of literature on aesthetic leadership, Katz-Buonincontro (2011) identifies four qualities of aesthetic leadership: emotional awareness and empathy, sensory and somatic awareness, interest in organizational beauty, and promotion of moral purpose. While each element defines individual qualities or goals, each also provokes questions about how the leader attends to these dimensions of the group’s activity—questions we take up in our analysis of experienced facilitators’ reflections on their practice.

Methods

The research question for our study is: How do experienced facilitators conceptualize their facilitation practices? As we describe below, our analysis of the facilitators’ responses led us to apply and adapt an aesthetic leadership framework for facilitation practice.

Research design and methods

We interviewed 10 experienced facilitators known to the authors through their prior work with organizations engaged in teachers’ professional development. All met the following criteria:

- Had more than five years of facilitation practice (several had 10 to 20 years).
- Were described by at least two peers as experienced and effective facilitators of group learning processes.
- Had extensive experience facilitating teacher learning groups within schools (several also had significant experience facilitating in other contexts).

In addition to these criteria, we have had the opportunity to observe each as a facilitator; while we did not systematically evaluate the facilitator, we used our assessments of their effectiveness in supporting group learning processes to validate the peer assessments.

The group included seven women and three men. All ten interviewees began their careers as classroom teachers. Six began to facilitate groups while they were teachers; the others took on the role when they became administrators or joined organizations that provide professional development to teachers and schools. Collectively, they have facilitated teacher learning groups in settings from pre-K to secondary school (as well as in postsecondary settings); in rural, suburban, and urban contexts; and in public and independent schools.

The semi-structured interviews (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) prompted subjects to reflect on their own facilitation experiences and practices, especially as facilitators of teacher learning groups. Consistent with the research question for the study, our questions focused on how the facilitators conceptualize their facilitation practice, rather than on the techniques and moves they employ in their work. Subjects were asked to describe: (1) how they assessed the effectiveness of their facilitation, (2) what they paid attention to while facilitating; (3) aspects of facilitation they found satisfying; and (4) analogies or metaphors they apply to facilitation. Each of these questions, we believed, would prompt individual facilitators to reflect on their own conceptualization of facilitation practice. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

In our first-level analysis of the transcripts, we used inductive coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to derive topic codes (Richards & Morse, 2013) to describe and differentiate aspects of facilitators' reflections on practice. Separately, we coded the interviews then compared our individual codes. The initial topic codes we agreed upon were: (a) affective/emotional interaction with group, (b) group cohesion, and (c) individual autonomy. Reflecting on these emergent categories, we recognized a relationship with existing work on the aesthetics of leadership: a theoretical construct focused on the qualities of leadership that have less to do with particular strategies a leader might employ in order to move a group to a specific goal and more to do with how the leader attends to the quality of the experience of the group, i.e., to affective and emotional interaction, cohesion, and valuing of individual autonomy.

Aesthetics of Facilitation Framework

Exploring how the “aesthetics of facilitation” would map on to the “aesthetics of leadership,” we studied in particular Katz-Buonincontro’s framework identified above: emotional awareness and empathy; sensory and somatic awareness; interest in organizational beauty; and promotion of moral purpose. Re-examining our data and our initial coding in light of Katz-Buonincontro’s framework was helpful to us in developing our own analytical categories— affective awareness, embodied knowing, responsive designing, and authentic engagement—as we describe below.

Katz-Buonincontro’s discrete categories for “emotional awareness” and “sensory and somatic awareness” showed us important distinction to which we had not carefully attended in our initial coding: the difference between one’s disposition to be open to monitoring emotions (both others’ as well as one’s own) and the kinds of information one focuses on in order to assess the emotional status of a group, individual, or one’s self. A second review of the transcripts with Katz-Buonincontro’s categories helped us determine how facilitators in our sample described feeling and interpreting sensations in their own bodies (“my gut told me that I should . . .”) and focusing on the body language of others. Ultimately, we separated our initial category of “affective/emotional interaction with the group” into two categories that mirror Katz-Buonincontro’s dimensions: “affective awareness” and “embodied knowing.” (“Embodied knowing” as a term seemed more effective than “sensory and somatic awareness” at capturing

the lived experiences that facilitators described to us, which were more focused on bodily sensations than on environmental stimulation.)

What Katz-Buonincontro describes in a second category as “interest in organizational beauty” mapped closely on to our second emergent category, “group cohesion.” Both focus on the coherence and sense of satisfaction derived (by both facilitator and participants) in the group’s experience. However, re-reading our data in light of Katz-Buonincontro’s category revealed to us how far the interviewees went beyond a simple interest in or attention to organizational beauty to an active, moment-by-moment refining of the plans and moves in order to support a coherent and thoughtful learning experience for participants. Neither of the terms “group cohesion” or “interest in organizational beauty” seemed to capture this aspect of the data; we opted instead for “responsive designing.”

We recognized that Katz-Buonincontro’s last category, “promotion of moral purpose,” and the one we had initially coded for, “individual autonomy,” derived from a similar stance on the part of the leader or facilitator: a deep commitment to one or more fundamental principles or values, on which actions and decisions should be based. But we also recognized an important distinction: In Katz-Buonincontro’s framework, the leader’s commitment is to achieving a moral purpose. What we saw in our data indicated not the facilitator’s commitment to moving a group toward a moral purpose, but rather a commitment to ensuring that the processes of the group as a whole and the actions taken by individuals (including the facilitator him/herself) were fundamentally *ethical*—that is, were based on a shared set of principles or values.

To capture this principled stance, we changed our initial emergent coding from “individual autonomy” (which, as a broad category, calls attention to the most frequently cited principle or value that facilitators named) to “authentic engagement.” We then re-coded our data to look for instances not only in which facilitators described the importance of supporting individual autonomy but other instances in which they were voicing their concern for ensuring that the processes of the group embodied the principles or values that the group espoused.

Trustworthiness of Methodology

We sought to assure that our findings would conform to Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) four criteria for trustworthiness of qualitative research. In terms of *credibility*, we employed member checks with our interview subjects throughout the development of the four dimensions. We also deliberately sought out disconfirming evidence for our dimensions. We address *dependability*, or consistency, by making transparent the development of our coding scheme so that other researchers could apply it to the same or a related data set (i.e., interviews with experienced facilitators). By coding the data set separately, developing and comparing inductive codes, and continually reflecting on our own perspectives and biases in relation to facilitation, we strived for a degree of neutrality that would contribute to the *confirmability* of the findings. Finally, in relation to *transferability*, we recognize that the study is based on a relatively small data set and limited to experienced facilitators, thus we propose future studies to test the dimensions might include both surveys of larger numbers of facilitators and ethnographic observations of facilitators at work.

Findings

In the sections below, we elaborate each of the dimensions identified in our analysis: affective awareness, embodied knowing, responsive designing, and authentic engagement. We illustrate each dimension with excerpts from the interviews.

Affective Awareness

Affective awareness emerged as a consistent theme across our interviews with experienced facilitators. In reflecting on their own facilitation practice and how they conceptualize it, the facilitators described how they are attentive and responsive to emotions of participants in the group. They also described ways in which they recognize, assess, and manage their own emotional states.

Exemplifying how facilitators attend to participants' affect (and interests), one facilitator states, "I'm trying to understand who the group members are [and] to validate them." She continues:

Facilitation involves an awful lot of assessment of the people you're working with. What are they interested in? What's their understanding of the topic being discussed? What are their needs? What's their comfort zone and tolerance for risk-taking?

The importance of validation, in emotional terms, becomes evident in another facilitator's concern that participants "don't feel that I'm judging them, but instead that we're here together to extend what we know...."

Another facilitator describes the need for participants in the group to "become human to one another" before launching into the work: "...who are we? Who are you, coming here into this space? What do you need and what are you bringing...?" Participants' needs are understood by the facilitator at a "human" level, in other words, encompassing emotional rather than solely professional ones.

For facilitators, then, sensitivity to others' emotional states is not simply a social lubricant that ensures smooth interactions within the group; rather, it allows the facilitator to access information about individuals' current affective state—including the need for emotional comfort and safety—which they draw on in facilitating the group's interaction and collective work.

The facilitators' reflections signal a deep attentiveness not only to the affective states of the individual participants in the group but also to the emotional tone of the group as a whole. Facilitators cite the "feeling" of the group as an essential indicator of the group's effectiveness. Reflecting on her work, one facilitator asks: "Have we created an oasis of sorts where people feel respected and can do productive work at the same time?" Another describes signs of a successful group this way:

Participants are smiling and laughing—or deeply in thought and quietly listening to a [colleague] and contemplating the particular issue or topic...individuals become more relaxed with each other...sitting with new people, chatting at coffee breaks, laughing together.

Attention here is directed not only toward the comfort and engagement of individuals but also toward the group as a whole: Facilitators are alert to an evolving positive connection among group members—often signaled by smiles and, especially, laughter, as a third facilitator reports:

I listen to laughter...it's celebratory and can connote a sense of togetherness and jubilation which is really important in a group...it's a very important social expression of connectedness....

Cultivating positive emotion, however, is not an end in itself. A strongly contrapuntal theme in the facilitators' reflections was their attentiveness to moments of tension, anxiety, and conflict, and to the learning opportunities that inhere in such moments. "Laughter," as the same facilitator describes:

can also indicate a level of anxiety, or it can be used to signal that I'm uncomfortable... and that's really important data as a facilitator because for some goals, you want a level of uncomfot, and laughter is a nice mechanism socially to kind of diffuse discomfort....

Similarly, another facilitator reflects on the complex relationship between positive affect and the opening that such emotion provides for people's willingness to experience the more difficult emotions that deep learning sometimes requires:

I'm paying attention to a certain level of affection in the group, which comes out sometimes as reassurance and sometimes as real honesty. In the group I have facilitated that I thought went best, it felt to me like people in the group felt like the others *needed* [emphasis in original] them to think hard about something—even if that something might make them feel uncomfortable. And people could do that kind of hard thinking because they understood that they were not being judged.

Facilitators also speak of being attuned to their own feelings as they respond to interactions within the groups. Sometimes this attention emerges in simple reminders about how to position themselves in relation to the work of the group. As one facilitator notes, "I've gotten better in general in just not taking things personally." Another facilitator, quoted above about the importance of validating individuals within the group, recognizes, "I may not get the 'strokes' I need."

This self-awareness seems particularly important during difficult moments. For example, another facilitator recognizes that his response to an emotionally charged moment, for himself and the group, can help move a group towards a positive outcome. Referring to a meeting in which his facilitation resulted in strongly critical comments from the group, he recalls: "And then in the moment, I definitely was flustered because the people who got upset about this were very, very actively upset and then became disengaged." Recognizing his own emotional discomfort, he addressed the episode through discussions with and emails to the members of the group. "And so I think...there are these cues when...things aren't going well, and you have to be ready to respond and figure out how to respond appropriately to it." The facilitator's own emotional response becomes as important as the manifestations of individual participants' or the groups' affective state(s) in providing information that may guide the facilitator's actions, in the moment or, in this case, at a later point.

For facilitators, affective awareness involves paying attention both to the many kinds of “cues” participants and the group may give about their/its emotional states and to one’s own emotional responses at any given time within the group. All are potential sources of information that contribute to how the facilitator supports the learning of the group.

Embodied Knowing

As with emotions, the body itself is described by facilitators as a resource for understanding or making meaning of the group’s activity. Facilitators are undoubtedly attuned to the body language of participants; as one facilitator relates, “I pay careful attention to relationships, body language, sub-surface conflict and anything else that gives me information about the cohesiveness or tensions within the group.” Another identifies the “sorts of kind of nonverbal clues, cues” that allow him to assess participants’ engagement during the discussion: “there is the nonverbal cue of the exasperated look and looking at your watch, checking your email, just truly not being present.”

Another facilitator describes the importance of “eye gaze” within a group:

I spend a lot of time paying attention to people’s eye gaze. Where is their focus of attention? [...] I’m scanning the room all the time and I’m trying to read the room. And typically I’m trying to read attention and energy and make inferences about engagement [from] where people are looking, who they are looking at.

Even as he attends to participants’ eye gaze, the facilitator is aware of how his own might affect individuals’ and the group’s interactions. For example, if a participant is directing a comment to the facilitator, rather than to other participants, “I intentionally don’t focus on the speaker. I look at other people and that usually sends a signal to the speaker that they should be looking at other people.” The facilitator recognizes that his bodily activity, in this case, eye gaze, along with that of participants, coexists with verbal signals in communicating with the group and making meaning of the group’s interactions.

Along with looking, facilitators commonly highlight listening as a key facilitation skill. One facilitator highlights the benefit for the facilitator—and for the group—of “being silent” as a means to heighten receptivity to the group’s own embodied language, “to be looking for nonverbal cues as to what’s going wrong and what needs to be adapted.” Another describes the importance of “listening for silence” within the group. “I listen for lulls. And when I hear the lull, I think, ‘People have had their first pass at the subject; they’re ready to go deeper.’” This facilitator notes the benefit of listening even to the point of her own discomfort, “My rule of thumb is to always give a few beats more than I’m comfortable with”—suggesting that even discomfort, physical or emotional, can contribute to her facilitation and to group’s learning processes.

As with the attention to his own “eye gaze” described above, another facilitator recognizes the benefit of “[paying] attention to my own listening.” Doing so not only allows the facilitator to read and respond to the group’s activity in a more informed manner, it also “communicates a sense of respect and validation” to the group. Still another describes how listening to her own responses to the group is as important as listening to participants: “I listen to my curiosities and write them down. I listen to people and I have a lot of questions about where they’re coming from, why they’re saying the things they’re saying.”^[SEP]In other words, listening,

like looking, as bodily action, allows the facilitator to both take in the activity of the group and communicate messages with the group.

Nor is embodied knowing limited to vision and hearing. One facilitator recognizes the benefit for a group, especially one working in a stressful situation, to put its emphasis elsewhere in the body. Putting aside the discussion protocol she planned for the group, she describes telling the group, "Let's breathe." Another facilitator homes in on the way she moves her hands during a group meeting: "I pay attention to the threads—what are the threads of the conversation? . . . If you see my hands they're kind of like trying to pull things together with my hands." She relates her gestures to the facilitator's function in helping a group to synthesize, or achieve an "integrated statement." The gestures become part of the facilitator's and the group's meaning-making processes.

At times it may be difficult to locate the specific component of the body that does the monitoring. As one facilitator relates, in describing how she determines whether or how to intervene within a group's discussion, "I pay attention to the reactions I feel in my body." Juxtaposing bodily experience with cognition, she adds, "Usually, I can feel it in my body even before I'm thinking it."

The facilitator's body, thus, is constantly engaged in a meaning making process, both "reading" with his or her own body the bodies of other members of the group and communicating to the group with his or her body in ways that seek to create or reinforce conditions for learning.

Responsive Designing

Facilitators in this study express their understanding of the intimate relationship between form (or process) and purpose for discussions in metaphorical terms that often invoked the arts. For example, one facilitator describes the importance of process this way:

I've never talked to one of those sandcastle artists, but I believe their work is really about the process. Otherwise why else would they be working somewhere where eventually everything is going to disappear? And so I think facilitation is like that as well. Facilitation for learning is about the process of learning. It's about helping that experience to thrive. And so therefore the sandcastle could eventually go away, the discussion will eventually disperse, but you created that environment.

The product of the facilitator's work, then, is the process through which participants engage in learning experiences.

Given this centrality of process, attending to the design of the group's collective experience is essential. The work of learning collaboratively is complex, making coherence both vitally important as well as difficult to achieve and sustain. Facilitators reflected on the ways in which their actions created the conditions for the group's collective experience to cohere and thrive. One comments:

I think of a good facilitated conversation in terms of form following function, or starting with the purpose and thinking about how the shape or design of the conversation can support that purpose. Designing a space, or a container for the conversation, that will hold people safely and keep them focused and moving forward.

The design features for the conversation are notable in that they balance concerns for safety and movement (or progress).

A number of facilitators spoke of the careful thought they give to the design of the group's experiences, seeking a shape that is purposeful, logical, and lucid. One relates the facilitator's thinking about design to the architect's:

Architects, really good ones, spend a lot of time thinking about human beings, how they get fulfilled within spaces, and then design spaces to either amplify the desired human behaviors or allow opportunities for new behaviors to come forward... Sometimes [as facilitators] we're designing physical spaces but more often we're designing mental spaces for people to inhabit, and it requires designing things that people can use in their interactions.

Here, the "mental spaces" the facilitator designs are not only for living comfortably within but for interacting with others in ways that lead to a sense of progress or movement.

The ultimate shape of the group's work, however, is not up to the facilitator alone. Facilitators must manage a complex dynamic, balancing their responsibility and desire to create a focused and coherently structured learning experience with the need to respond to and draw on the diverse concerns, questions, working contexts, and expertise of the members of the group. As one facilitator describes:

I know something that's hard for me, and I suspect is also hard for other people, is knowing sometimes when a structured thing is needed and when a more free-flowing thing is needed. Sometimes, I feel I make a good call in that regard, and other times I don't, and a lot of times I'm dependent on feedback from people at the end.

Another facilitator captures the dialectic this way:

The way in which you build 90 minutes is you're hoping that you're capturing everyone there—you're creating a mix of you leading an experience and also allowing them to lead the group. It's an interesting balance.

Responsiveness, then, is an essential feature of the facilitator's design work. Facilitators again invoke arts metaphors in describing the balance they seek between designing and responding; one referenced dance and music: "I'm paying attention to the rhythm, the dance, the music. I'm not quite a conductor, because I don't know exactly where the conversation is going to go." Another facilitator reflects on her work in terms of fabric design:

The people in the group all contribute their different colors, and you can see both how those threads and colors connect and blend, and how they contrast and vary. The facilitator helps make sure all those yarns are linked together in some way, but it's a responsibility that is shared with the group members themselves.

Still another facilitator uses the metaphor of way-finding to express the delicate combination of directiveness and responsiveness required in her work:

I can imagine that I am a something like a compass. When you're walking with a compass, you learn that you can't always go straight ahead to your destination. You encounter a river. So you may need to go east even as you want to go north. And sometimes as you go east, you discover that there's another direction you need to move in other than north. My work is to pay attention to the compass. I'm guiding. I'm paying attention to where the group said they wanted to go and what's happening right now in terms of that journey.

As in the art-making metaphors, the facilitator here plays key roles not in leading the group's work in absolute terms, but in helping the group determine its own direction and then in supporting the group to follow that path.

The space that the facilitator designs, then, needs to be one that can change and evolve once the group comes to inhabit and interact within that space. While the group's work needs to be thoughtfully crafted, that crafting is the result of the facilitator's inner deliberation as well as a cultivated openness and responsiveness to the experience of the group.

Authentic Engagement

Our interviews with facilitators reveal an ethical dimension of the facilitator's role in relation to the group. This dimension is characterized by a commitment to making visible one's thinking about the group's learning and a commitment to fostering responsibility among participants for that learning. A facilitator's ethical commitment is evident in his or her own efforts to live by the principles guiding the work of the group as a whole. As one comments:

I try to do the work myself that I teach other people to do.... So if I'm teaching people to be reflective and get feedback, I have to be able to say that I do this too with my own work. If I'm helping others to become facilitators, I have to think about my own facilitation...when I do less than good work, I know that it's because I don't practice it myself.

Not only do facilitators seek to "practice what they preach," they also attempt to make their efforts to do so fully visible, or transparent, to the group. One facilitator recalls an experience in which he withheld his complete openness from the group. In asking the group for input on the agenda he had planned, he realized it wasn't working:

I asked the group for input, and people shared ideas. After about 10 minutes, I [said], "Okay. Thank you.... I'm now clear what we should do. Here's how we're going to proceed...." Then somebody raised their hand and said, "We didn't agree to that. We didn't decide on that." And I had a really good 'aha,' which was, "You're right." When I framed the request for input, I wasn't clear. In fact, I was almost deliberately murky because I was a little bit hesitant to assert my leadership.

Reflecting on this experience of downplaying for the group his role in facilitation, the facilitator derives an important lesson about transparency in the role: “I should’ve just said, ‘I want to get your thinking to help me make a decision about how to move forward.’”

Another facilitator draws a similar connection between authenticity and being “transparent” about one’s failings: “The way people treat people is important. It’s important to be authentic. When you make a mistake, you can say, ‘So that didn’t work. I thought we would be able to do X, and that didn’t work.’” The facilitator’s transparency, in turn, encourages the kind of focus and resilience that enables the group to take in stride the missteps of various kinds without derailing the group’s learning. She continues:

In a group that works in an ongoing way, I can make mistakes as a facilitator without losing my credibility as a facilitator and without losing the group. And we can all just agree that we should have done something else instead, and then it just contributes to the next session. And part of my role is to acknowledge the critique and, in an ongoing group, then what I have to do is show that something I do the next time we meet is different because of the feedback.

The facilitator’s ethical commitment to his or her own authenticity is not solipsistic; rather it meshes with a concern for the group’s developing sense of responsibility for one another’s learning—and for the work of the group as a whole. As one facilitator acknowledges, “I think often . . . strong facilitators do put you in a situation where you feel uncomfortable with what is being discussed or the topic at hand but not the environment. And I think part of that is putting people together who wouldn’t necessarily talk about something, but in that instance, do.”

Collaboration, in this context, is more than working together. It becomes an ethical activity of taking responsibility for one another’s learning. Further, collaboration may be viewed as distributing the facilitator’s role itself—making that role transparent to, and thus, accessible to other group members. This activity of distribution is evident in one facilitator’s comments: “The big piece of the facilitation is creating that space or helping [participants] to create the opportunity to create the space.” Another facilitator acknowledges this may not come easily to all participants or within all groups:

[Another] challenge [is] getting other people to share responsibility with you...that people share responsibility for the kind of monitoring of the group and how well it lives by its rules and structures. It’s always better when someone says, “I felt in the discussion part of the [discussion] protocol, we weren’t really responding to each other; we were just taking turns.”

Transparency is not the goal; rather it is a commitment to the facilitator’s own authenticity before the group and an encouragement of authenticity within and among the participants of the group. What matters, ultimately, is not only the quality of engagement of the facilitator, but the quality of engagement of the group. However, absent the facilitator’s recognition of and attention to his or her internal deliberation, or conversation, there would be no possibility to make that conversation audible to the group, to be used for its own transformative purposes.

The facilitator, then, is the catalyst for the group members' deepening relationship to and connection with one another. One facilitator offers:

All the better in a group when everybody feels devoted to the group and the individuals in it. So that even when they are raising a tough point, they see themselves working together rather than finding out something about a person that they used to respect.

When the group itself starts to embrace and enact its authenticity, this results in greater investment in the work of the group and a deepening of the trust among group members, both of which contribute to deepening of the group's learning.

Discussion

Each of the four dimensions identified above—*affective awareness*, *embodied knowing*, *responsive design*, and *authentic engagement*—encompasses a range of ways in which facilitators conceptualize their practice as it relates to the groups, and individuals within the groups, they facilitate. While each dimension points to a discernible aspect of experience, these dimensions also overlap. For example, when one facilitator says, "I pay attention to the reactions I feel in my body," she may be pointing to affective feelings, such as a heightened concern for a participant's emotional well-being at a particular moment in a discussion, or she may be describing a more embodied response, for example, a physical sense of discomfort or easing of tension. Either explanation recognizes the facilitator's meaning making, in that moment, as feminist theorists have articulated, as "a moment of emotional and physical response, not a moment of dispassionate self-reflection" (Michaelson, 1998, 226). In other words, the affective or embodied knowing has inherent value rather than merely value as "a producer of raw data that the mind will fashion into knowledge formations" (Fenwick, 2004, 49).

Similarly, when facilitators describe "creating space[s]" for the group's interaction as a design imperative, they also evoke an ethical imperative to foster the development of the group's authentic engagement with the shape and direction its work may take. As one facilitator puts it, the facilitator is "creating a mix of you [the facilitator] leading an experience and also allowing them [participants] to lead the group." Such a view is consistent with Maxine Greene's (1995) belief that community, like freedom, must be achieved by persons "[who are] offered the space in which to discover what they recognize together and appreciate in common" (39). Recognizing this as a goal profoundly impacts the ways in which facilitators make, to use a term from theater improvisation, "offers," verbal or nonverbal, within the groups they facilitate.

The interaction among the four dimensions is evident, too, in a dialectic that facilitators manifest in reflections on their practice and, especially, their role with the group. We describe this dialectic as jointly occurring *inward-facing* and *outward-facing* orientations. The inward/outward dialectic appears in how facilitators describe their attention to both the emotional tenor of the group and, at the same time, to their own emotional response to the group at any given moment. It appears as well in how facilitators describe how participants communicate bodily, for example, the "nonverbal cue of the exasperated look," and also how their own bodies communicate, for example, through eye gaze or the use of hand gestures of "pulling things together."

The dialectic is evident, too, in facilitators' metaphors for how they think about the shape, or design, for a group's meeting: inward attention to generating a structure for the group's work that will help the group achieve its goals, accompanied by outward attention to reading and responding to the group's interests, affective states, and evolving goals. One facilitator captures this balance in describing herself as a "compass" for the group—simultaneously guiding the group and being ever responsive to changing conditions within the group that affect its direction.

Enacting the outward moves that facilitators take in a meeting or discussion, facilitators are inwardly aware of how they are making their words and actions transparent to the group, in order to validate the group's ownership of and agency in the discussion and its outcomes. One facilitator expresses this outward/inward dialectic in her comments on responding to a group's feedback on a meeting: "...what I have to do is show that something I do the next time we meet is different because of the feedback." "Showing" here is the outer product of inner reflection based on what is learned through outer engagement with the group.

In effect, facilitators engage in two conversations, at times parallel, at others intersecting: one conversation takes place—both literally and symbolically—between the facilitator and the group—through words and gestures; the second conversation is the one facilitators engage in with themselves—attending to their own emotional responses, bodily feelings, and metaphorical understandings. From the point of view of aesthetic leadership, and theories of aesthetics generally, to describe one conversation as "doing facilitation" and another as "talking about facilitation" would be an artificial and, ultimately, unproductive distinction. Rather, as we suggest below, improving facilitation practice depends on making both, in Dewey's (1934) terms, objects for reflection and reconstruction.

The inward and outward orientations described above were evident in all the facilitators' reflections on their facilitation practice. Overall we found a great deal of consistency and complementarity across all participants' perspectives. However, we did identify a difference by gender in the responses. The three male facilitators spoke more extensively about responsive design components, using metaphors of architects, sand castle builders, etc. The seven women we interviewed were more likely to discuss aspects of what we came call authentic engagement, that is, making one's thinking process and decision-making both internally consistent with their values and also explicitly transparent to the group. While our study size was too small to draw conclusions based on gender (or other differences), these differences suggest possibilities for further investigation for teacher leadership as a field of inquiry and practice.

Conclusion

Facilitation as a professional role has sometimes suffered from the assumption that great facilitators—like great teachers—are born rather than made. An opposite (but equally unhelpful) assumption is that facilitation—like teaching—is mainly a matter of learning a set of techniques, a somewhat mechanical matter of keeping time and following an agenda, which can be learned with relative ease. We maintain that neither view captures the complex interaction between a facilitator's dispositions and the specific strategies or moves he or she enacts to fulfill the role.

The framework we offer in this article allows us, instead, to analyze facilitation practice—whether that of an apparently "natural" expert or of a teacher taking on the role for the first time—as a dynamic interaction of social, emotional, bodily, and cognitive processes. It illuminates something often invisible to those observing a skilled facilitator at work, the internal dynamic, or "conversation," the facilitator maintains, even as he or she engages outwardly,

through words and actions, with the group. These co-occurring processes are at the heart of skillful and self-reflective facilitation. Uncovering them not only allows for appreciation of how facilitators attend to multiple dimensions of the role, but provides a resource for critical self-reflection on facilitation practice.

Of course, the four dimensions of aesthetic leadership discussed here do not exist as discrete categories and so are not easily separable. In considering how they might inform facilitators' reflection and practice, it might be most useful to treat them as lenses with which to examine the experiences of facilitators, with each lens bringing into relief particular aspects or characteristics of the whole experience. As a set of lenses, this framework could be especially useful for developing facilitators, and for programs that support teacher leaders' development more generally.

Novice facilitators, and even more experienced ones, often yearn for the answers to pressing questions such as: "What does a good meeting agenda look like?" "How do I move a group from one topic to the next?" "What do I do when members of the group disagree?" Confronted with the immediate imperative of making sure that a group accomplishes its goals and tasks, many are eager to learn specific protocols and moves that help them guide a group through meetings and projects—in other words, an outward-facing orientation. While developing this kind of "facilitator's toolkit" is certainly important, our analysis of experienced facilitators' perspectives on their practice suggests that equal importance be accorded to the cultivation of facilitators' inward-facing orientation: a facilitator's capacity to be sensitive to—and inclination to reflect on—his or her affective state at any particular moment; the forms of embodied knowing he or she experiences; the internal images he or she holds of the shape of a discussion; and his or her commitment to authenticity.

While it can be important to provide responses to the burning questions new or developing facilitators have ("What do I *do*?"), conceptualizing facilitation as aesthetic leadership (and not simply strategic leadership or organizational leadership) suggests a variety of activities that could be helpful to facilitators both in dedicated facilitator training sessions and throughout their work as facilitators. For example, many facilitators learn the importance of the post-meeting debrief: reflecting with participants on how the meeting went, whether the group accomplished its goals, what it could do to improve its process next time. Researchers have given attention to the questions facilitators might ask to guide this discussion (Allen & Blythe, 2004; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2013). Offering facilitators a set of reflection questions focused on helping them cultivate their sensitivity to their own internal states and processes is equally important; these might include:

- Were there moments in this meeting at which I felt comfortable/uncomfortable? Why?
- Were there points in this meeting when I felt surprised, startled, confused? Why?
- Did I feel the locus of agency within the group shift—either from me to the group or from the group to me? When? What did I feel and do in that moment? Why?
- Were there moments when I pressed the group (and myself) to stick to my original facilitation plan rather than allowing the group to make a spontaneous shift, or vice versa? What did I base my decision on? What were the results?

While it can be helpful to reflect on such questions with colleagues who were taking part in the group, it may be equally important to seek out other facilitators with whom to share reflections. Videos of group meetings provide one resource for such discussions. However, while collaborative analysis of video from meetings can be very effective, it should focus not only on the visible moves the facilitators make during the meeting (the outward manifestations of the facilitator's role) but also on probing the internal dialogue the facilitator was having with herself at particular points in the meeting—whether recalled by the focal facilitator or inferred or speculated on by colleagues.

Engaging facilitators (both experienced and novice) in thinking with and through metaphors also offers a powerful approach to self-reflection. The facilitators in this study invoked vivid and complex metaphors that both illuminated and shaped their thinking about their work with groups. Working with metaphors could become a useful part of both facilitator training efforts and the long-term reflective practice of facilitators. Facilitators might read and reflect on metaphors offered by other facilitators—both those in this article as well as those of colleagues—and consider questions such as: What aspects of facilitation does this metaphor reveal or highlight? What aspects of facilitation does this metaphor play down or ignore? Facilitators might also be invited to develop their own metaphors and challenged to consider how those metaphors deepen or evolve over time.

Viewing facilitation as aesthetic leadership provokes the question, how might the professional learning experiences of facilitators allow them to develop both an “inner eye” and “outer eye” on their own facilitation, that is, one that is attuned to internal capacities and the external activity of the facilitator? Equally importantly, viewing facilitation as aesthetic leadership, provides resources for continual reflection on one's own facilitation practice as it relates to learning within groups. Both goals support a deeper understanding of and commitment to facilitation as a key component of teacher leadership.

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