RESEARCH

Facilitating Learning Through Facilitation: How Facilitation Skills Can Inform Communication Center Tutoring Best Practices

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Abstract

Communication centers can benefit from the facilitation training literature currently used in the areas of leadership, consulting, and dialogue and deliberation. Skills such as remaining "substantively neutral" or "passionately impartial," knowing when to intervene, active listening, self-monitoring, questioning and clarification, and modeling good communication practices are all part of the facilitator's "tool kit" that can prepare peer tutors to be more competent communicators. By drawing from facilitation training, communication centers can equip peer tutors with a skill set that can be easily translated into a variety of interpersonal contexts.

The use of the phrase 'peer tutor' is widely used and accepted in the literature on communication center best practices, but the implications, specifically regarding power and relationships between tutors and tutees, has led to some confusion and misinterpretation of the phrase (Topping, 2005; Turner & Sheckels, 2015). For some, labeling students as 'peer tutors' is misleading because it implies that student tutors and student tutees are of equal power, when in reality there is a significant disparity in experience, expertise, and therefore power (Scott, 1992; Turner & Sheckels, 2015). In order to address this "shadowy line" (Turner & Sheckels, 2015, p. 53) between tutor and tutee, communication centers may benefit from the facilitation training literature currently used in the areas of leadership, consulting, and dialogue and deliberation.

This essay will argue that communication center tutors can be conceptualized as facilitators of communication processes as well as facilitators of the learning process itself. Treating tutors as facilitators provides a comprehensive framework that addresses the role of the tutor, the communication competency skill set needed to effectively tutor, and ways to break down, teach, and practice those skills in order to train new tutors, including those without a communication studies background. Most importantly for communication centers, the facilitation literature clearly addresses dynamics of power and relationship between facilitator and client, using language that may be more in line with institutional and administrative rhetorics and therefore useful for characterizing and explaining the tutoring process within and outside of the communication center. Additionally, conceptualizing communication center tutors as facilitators opens a broad area of communication research firmly rooted in the foundations of competent communication (Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Daniels

& Walker, 2001), providing another avenue for introducing these significant theoretical and pedagogical theories to students.

In addition to the fuzzy implications of acting as a 'peer tutor,' communication centers are confronted with the challenging realities posed by engaging with students across disciplines, as either tutor or tutee (Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2012). When engaging across disciplines, superficiality is a significant concern. Communication center clients from other disciplines may perceive tutor involvement as superficial when tutors do not sufficiently or appropriately adapt to or integrate discipline-specific practices or language, taking what Dannels and Housley Gaffney refer to as an "etic" approach (p. 100). Communication center tutors from other disciplines may be constrained to a superficial understanding of communication theories and practices due to the limited time and resources some centers have when training new tutors. Dannels and Housley Gaffney suggest that balancing communication expertise of tutors with the situated expertise of clients can be a real challenge for communication centers, and one that requires a reframing of the communication center. The next section lays out how the facilitation literature could provide the sort of reframing necessary to find this balance.

Defining Facilitation

To facilitate, at the most basic denotative level, means "to make easy." Conceptualizing the communication center tutor as a facilitator, then, would mean that the tutor's role is to make the process of learning easier for clients. This idea, however, is nothing new to the field of communication center tutoring (Allen & Feldman, 1973; Galbraith & Winterbottom, 2011; Roscoe & Chi, 2007). The facilitation literature contributes an expanded definition of the

facilitator, though, that describes the facilitator as a person with no substantive decision-making power who diagnoses and intervenes to help improve process efficiency (Schwarz, 2002). The important aspect of this definition is that facilitators do not have substantive decision-making power; in other words, facilitators cannot be invested in the outcome of the communication process they are facilitating.

Facilitator Impartiality and Tutoring

In the facilitation literature, facilitator impartiality is a central theme (Britt, 2014; Carcasson & Sprain, 2012; Daniels & Walker, 2001; Dillard, 2013; Kolb, 2004; Ruebke, 2010; Schuman, 2012; Schwarz, 2002; Sprain & Carcasson, 2013; Stewart, 2006). In leadership, consulting, and dialogue and deliberation it is important that facilitators act impartially in order to build trust with the client (Ruebke, 2010) and ensure that the parties involved perceive the process as fair (Daniels & Walker, 2001; Schwarz, 2002; Schuman, 1996; Sprain & Carcasson, 2013). Additionally, remaining impartial about the content can maintain a sense of competency, capability, and agency for the client since the facilitator is the process expert, but the client retains the role of subject expert.

Schwarz (2002) refers to this concept as "substantive neutrality," in order to indicate the facilitator's impartiality regarding the content but not the process. While this term effectively establishes the role of the facilitator, it is better suited to the setting of organizational consulting where facilitators are more likely to encounter interpersonal conflicts, power dynamics, and deep conflicting values, and are less likely to have any expert knowledge in the subject matter. While tutors may encounter some of these group dynamics when consulting with client groups, substantive neutrality does not capture the identity management communication center tutors

must do since tutors are more likely to have some expert knowledge in the subject matter, such as knowledge about presentation best practices, creation and use of visual aids, or even institutional practices at their university.

Carcasson and Sprain's (2013) term "passionate impartiality" better captures the complexity of the tutor's role. Originally conceptualized within the frame of deliberative democracy, passionately impartial scholars and students are individuals who are "passionate about their community, democracy, and solving problems, but are also committed to serving a process-focused role in order to improve communication practices" (p. 19). The passionate impartiality framework also makes room for identity management, in that it acknowledges that students and scholars have existing beliefs, opinions, and knowledge bases that they cannot completely set aside. Instead of putting aside their passions or trying to detach themselves from their beliefs and knowledge, students and scholars should channel their energy into a particular process rather than a particular subject or cause.

This idea can be adapted to provide a framework for communication center tutoring. Passionately impartial tutors in the communication center are those individuals who are passionate and knowledgeable about communication theories and the tutoring process itself. Passionately impartial tutors are not required to be experts in the subjects clients may be studying, they do not have a stake in the outcome of a session, and they do not direct clients to make specific decisions. Instead, the passionately impartial tutor helps guide the client through the learning process by helping clients evaluate the benefits and tradeoffs of the possible approaches available to them.

By regarding oneself as a passionately impartial tutor rather than a peer tutor, students may find it easier to establish boundaries with clients since it more overtly acknowledges the power dynamics of the consultant-client relationship, helping students avoid the common missteps that occur when the power dynamic is less clearly managed, such as acting as "near-peer" or "co-peer" (Turner & Sheckels, 2015, p. 52). The passionately impartial tutor has expertise, and therefore power, regarding communication and presentation best practices, but the tutee has power over the outcome of the project or presentation. The passionately impartial tutor also makes space to integrate the client's situated language and knowledge, easing the process of tutoring between disciplines and avoiding an "etic" approach by engaging the client's subject expertise (Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2012). In order to help clients through this process, passionately impartial tutors can draw from the facilitator's 'tool kit' and use the many communication competency-based skills described in the facilitation literature.

Facilitation Skills and Tutoring

Facilitators have a range of skills and tools they can use to help guide communication processes while remaining impartial to the subject matter (Britt, 2014; Carcasson & Sprain, 2012; Public Agenda, 2012). These skills are often included in communication center training materials already, but the facilitation literature provides additional ways of presenting and teaching these skills to tutors. Many of the facilitation skills are based in the research on competent communication, which refers to an individual's ability to interact effectively with others (Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Daniels & Walker, 2001). Competent communicators are able to develop and achieve goals, effectively collaborate with others, and adapt to changing situations (Bochner & Kelly, 1974), and skills such as active listening, asking clarifying questions, giving

feedback within communication exchanges, and self-monitoring verbal and nonverbal behaviors allow individuals to communicate competently (Daniels & Walker, 2001).

Active Listening

Developing effective listening skills is the first step to becoming an effective facilitator. More specifically, facilitators should develop and practice active listening skills (Daniels & Walker, 2001). Active listening can be broken down into actions that can be taught, practiced, and applied. The specific actions involved in active listening are providing non-verbal acknowledgment, prompting further detail, and paraphrasing individual's opinions and thoughts. Non-verbal acknowledgment is an important aspect because it lets the client know that she is being heard. Prompting further detail is important since it encourages the client to dig deeper and provide a more detailed account of what she perceives the problem to be. Paraphrasing a client's opinions and thoughts back to her lets the client know that she is not just being heard, but that she is being understood. Paraphrasing can also prompt further detail since if the paraphrase does not accurately capture what the client wished to express, she may be motivated to clarify by restating her idea or by providing more information.

Asking Questions

In order prompt clients for further detail, facilitators should become adept at utilizing probing questions that encourage clients to consider the costs, benefits, and other consequences of various solutions or approaches, or encourage clients to reflect deeper on the motivations and goals they have (Carcasson & Sprain, 2012). Since any facilitator involvement can be considered a facilitator intervention, any and all questions should be meaningfully motivated (Carcasson &

Sprain, 2012; Kolb, 2004; Schuman, 2005; Schwarz, 2002). Questions in tutoring sessions, then, should focus on guiding the client through the learning process, but facilitators should be careful not to move too quickly through this process.

Facilitators should also be prepared to be flexible with the types of questions that are asked. Some questions, such as those about the assignment, the expectations of the professor, or the make-up of the speech audience, may be standard and necessary in all appointments, but tutors should also be prepared to ask questions that prompt deeper reflection. For example, the question "what is your speech topic?" does not prompt further reflection and locks the client into a narrow set of possibilities for how to respond, but the question "why did you choose this speech topic?" may encourage the client to reflect on the deeper values and interest he holds. Once those values and interests are brought to the surface, it may be possible for the facilitator and client to work together to discover new possibilities without the narrow constraint of a specific topic.

Facilitator Intervention

Asking questions is one reason to intervene within a tutoring session, but facilitators may choose to intervene for other reasons. Carcasson and Sprain (2012) note that facilitators may choose to intervene in order to manage time or otherwise adhere to a structured process. This is important to communication center practices since appointments are often booked back-to-back and tutors must keep on schedule. However, competent process-related interventions keep the process on schedule without making clients feel rushed or unimportant. By making the time constraint clear from the beginning of the appointment, process-related interventions may seem less abrupt later in the appointment. Facilitators can also use a process-related intervention

early in the appointment in order to remind the client of the tutoring process and involve him or her in the development of goals that can be reasonably accomplished within the time constraint.

Schwarz (2002) identifies additional reasons for facilitator intervention including the need to respond to nonverbal or verbal behaviors and the need to respond to emotions. Tutors may need to intervene in order to respond to the client's nonverbal or verbal behaviors if the client is moving excessively during his or her speech, or if he or she is using excessive vocal fillers. Tutors may find it necessary to intervene in order to respond to the client's emotions if the client is especially nervous, agitated, or otherwise upset. Clients who experience speech anxiety or have a high level of communication apprehension, meaning they are fearful or anxious of communicating with another person or are made fearful or anxious by the anticipation of communicating with another person (McCroskey, 1977), may require reassurance that the tutor's role is to help them, not to judge or grade them, and that the tutor will keep the conversations and events of the appointment private.

Modeling Competency

Another communication competency skill that is important to facilitators is the skill of modeling a clear, effective, and appropriate communication style that clients can observe and emulate (Daniels & Walker, 2001). This includes self-monitoring verbal and nonverbal behaviors and providing adequate and appropriate feedback in response to other's communication. These skills are especially important for communication center tutors, since in addition to facilitating appointments that address clients' specific goals, tutors should strive to help clients become more competent communicators in all areas, including the public speaking

that clients often come to the center to improve, as well as the interpersonal communication that goes on between the client and the tutor.

Facilitation and Tutor Training

The literature on facilitation provides several examples of training manuals developed to help facilitators learn and practice the basic communication competencies need to guide clients through the learning process (Britt, 2012; Carcasson & Sprain, 2012; Public Agenda, 2012; Ruebke, 2010; Schuman, 2012; Schwarz, 2002). Many of these examples are created with ordinary citizens in mind, and do not assume a strong knowledge of communication theory or communication competency (Carcasson & Sprain, 2012; Public Agenda, 2012; Ruebke, 2010). While these training manuals often approach facilitation within the perspective of leadership and business (Hunter, Thorpe, Brown, & Bailey, 2009; Schwarz, 2002), public dialogue and deliberation (Britt, 2012; Carcasson & Sprain, 2012; Public Agenda, 2012; Schuman, 2012), or conflict management (Daniels & Walker, 2001; Ruebke, 2010), the facilitation concepts can easily be adapted for the communication center setting.

With this in mind, a possible next step for applied communication center scholarship could be the development of communication center training manuals that are styled after the facilitation manuals and include sections on passionate impartiality and breakdowns of the communication competency skills that can be taught and practiced. As stated before, this is not to say that current communication center training manuals do not draw from communication competency — only that the facilitation framework provides a broader, more comprehensive approach. The facilitation framework also provides tutors with a common vocabulary with which to discuss and evaluate their own and others' performance. In training and observations,

tutors would be able to easily identify specific skills, such as balancing process-related interventions with emotion-related interventions, in order to set their own professional development goals as well as give and receive constructive feedback.

Another feature of the facilitation manuals that could be helpful to tutor training is the inclusion of the facilitator's "tool kit" — lists of example scenarios and possible responses, and basic questions that tutors can have at their disposal within appointments (Britt, 2012; Carcasson & Sprain, 2012). While such a "tool kit" is not meant to replace a thorough education in communication theory that can be seen as foundational to good communication tutoring, it emphasizes a certain degree of accessibility and efficiency that may be valuable for communication centers that lack the time or resources to provide in-depth training for tutors from outside the discipline.

For example, a communication center training manual could provide a typical scenario where a client complains about his assignment and remarks that he just wants to get it over with. The manual could provide tutors with several example responses, such as a clarifying question ("What is it about this assignment that you don't like?"), a probing question to encourage new possibilities ("How could you make this assignment more interesting for yourself?"), a probing question to encourage consideration of consequences ("If you 'just get it over with' what might happen?"), or a response to emotions ("I can tell you're frustrated with this assignment. What can we work on together to help you get through it?"). As demonstrated, this commonly heard sentiment in communication center appointments can be addressed with several process goals in mind, and equipping tutors with these "back-pocket" responses ahead

of time can help them to more confidently turn clients' remarks into productive learning opportunities rather than dismissing them as off-hand complaints.

Conclusion

The fuzzy implications of the phrase 'peer tutor' provide a challenge for communication centers when explaining the tutoring process to clients, colleagues across disciplines, and university administration (Scott, 1992; Turner & Sheckels, 2015). Additionally, as communication is recognized as a core skill across disciplines, communication centers are faced with training tutors and working with clients from diverse disciplines in a way that is substantial, rather than superficial (Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2012). In order to address these two broad challenges, communication centers can benefit from adopting or drawing upon a broader, more comprehensive framework such as that of facilitation as theorized and developed in the literatures on leadership, consulting, and dialogue and deliberation (Britt, 2014; Carcasson & Sprain, 2012; Public Agenda, 2012).

Conceptualizing tutors as passionately impartial facilitators of communication processes addresses the power and relationship dynamics between the consultant and client by avoiding the misconceptions and contradictory implications of the more traditional phrase "peer tutor." When tutors are seen as facilitators, their role becomes that of the passionately impartial process guide. This role prohibits tutors from becoming invested in the subject matter or the outcomes of an appointment, and prevents them from acting as a "near-peer" or "co-peer" and doing clients' work for them. Instead, this role enables tutors to guide the process, encourage thought and reflection about the consequences of the decisions clients may be considering, and make space in the conversation for the client's discipline-specific needs to be addressed in the

language appropriate to that discipline by using skills such as paraphrasing and strategic intervention. This can help balance the "etic/emic" challenge that Dannels and Housley Gaffney (2012) express by maintaining the consultant's power over communication and process, and the client's power over the subject and outcomes.

The facilitation literature reinforces a foundational skill set based in communication competency that tutors can learn and practice. Finally, the literature on facilitation training, which includes communication competency skills that are broken down into manageable actions and the facilitator's 'tool kit,' can inform tutoring training. Using a facilitation framework when approaching tutoring can aid communication centers in better characterizing and sharing their beneficial function within the broader university learning environment by providing an additional or alternative approach to the role of the tutor.

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