Ten Signs Of Facilitating Behavior And One Sign To Keep An Eye On In Children's Design Groups

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Abstract

The quality of the design process largely dictates the quality of the outcomes. Facilitating behavior, behavior directed at optimizing the process, is beneficial. To analyze children's contributions and experiences in a design process, looking for facilitating behavior gives meaningful insights, especially for the design of processes to come. In this text I provide ten signs of (positive) facilitating behavior, and one sign to keep an eye on.

Author Keywords

Facilitation, creativity, design, children, process

ACM Classification Keywords

Design, management

Introduction

A facilitator is focused on the processes that take place. On one hand, they observe closely, without intervening if it isn't necessary. On the other hand, they know what a good, productive process looks like, so they check: are the participants moving in the right direction? If they are going the wrong way, the facilitator intervenes.

Looking at a group of children, involved in a design process, through the eyes (and with the ears) of a facilitator is looking at the quality of the design process, which in itself is influenced by the group process.

The information in this text is applicable to both adults and children. That's why the word "participant" is used, instead of "child". Adults might say "Excuse me, I'd like to point out that we agreed on equal input, so speaking time should be evenly distributed. Maybe it's time to come to a close?", children will say "Hey, shut up, it's my turn." But despite the different use of words, they mean exactly the same.

Facilitating Behavior

A facilitator is focused on the process. S/he will remain within constraints and takes care of the desired quality of the outcomes. But whereas participants in the design process care about what the outcomes are, and have their favorites, the facilitator ideally does not. The only concern of the facilitator is that results are achieved, not which.

There are a number of things a facilitator does before and during the design process (and sometimes afterwards too). I focus on behavior instead of on, for instance, competencies, because behavior is easily visible whereas competencies are not.

This is illustrated by figure 1:

Competency	What the facilitator does
A. Plan Appropriate Group Processes	Choosing brainstorm techniques, providing "icebreaker" exercises
B. Create and Sustain a Participatory Environment	Presenting group rules, choosing appropriate methods for decision making
C. Guide Group to Appropriate and Useful Outcomes	Combining creativity techniques logically, guarding whether outcomes fit within given constraints

Figure 1: competencies vs. what the facilitator does

These competencies are three (out of the six) Core Competencies of the IAF, the International Association of Facilitators.(IAF (International Association of Facilitators), 2015)

It is not necessarily only the facilitator that shows this kind of behavior. Therefore I will refer to it as facilitating behavior, rather than facilitator behavior. It's very well possible that a group takes on part of these tasks or even all of these tasks themselves. Research shows groups lead by a trained facilitator yield better results than groups that do without, apparently little research has been done about sharing the burden.

With a cooperative group, the facilitating tasks are a co-production: participants participate in facilitating the process. This shows their concern, involved participants are beneficial for the outcomes of the process.

Juggling With Roles

Due to the combination of different roles in one person, some people have to switch roles now and again. The more roles, the more difficulties: it's not easy communicating which role one plays, and it is even more difficult to prevent roles to influence one another.

If someone mixes up roles, s/he will also start mixing up language: using I (client), we (participant) and you (facilitator) alternately.

Therefore it's plausible that "facilitating participants" are a sign of a good design process.

Three Roles In The Design Process

It's important to understand that there are at least three roles in the design process that have to be fulfilled:

- participant (designer)
- facilitator (process manager)
- client

Sometimes there's a division between client and problem owner, sometimes they are one and the same. It's not unusual for people to combine two or even three roles.

This is something to look out for: juggling with roles is more difficult than juggling with balls.

Why Looking For Facilitating Behavior?

When watching a group process, one can use different perspectives. Looking and listening for facilitating behavior is interesting because the quality of the design process is reflected in the results.
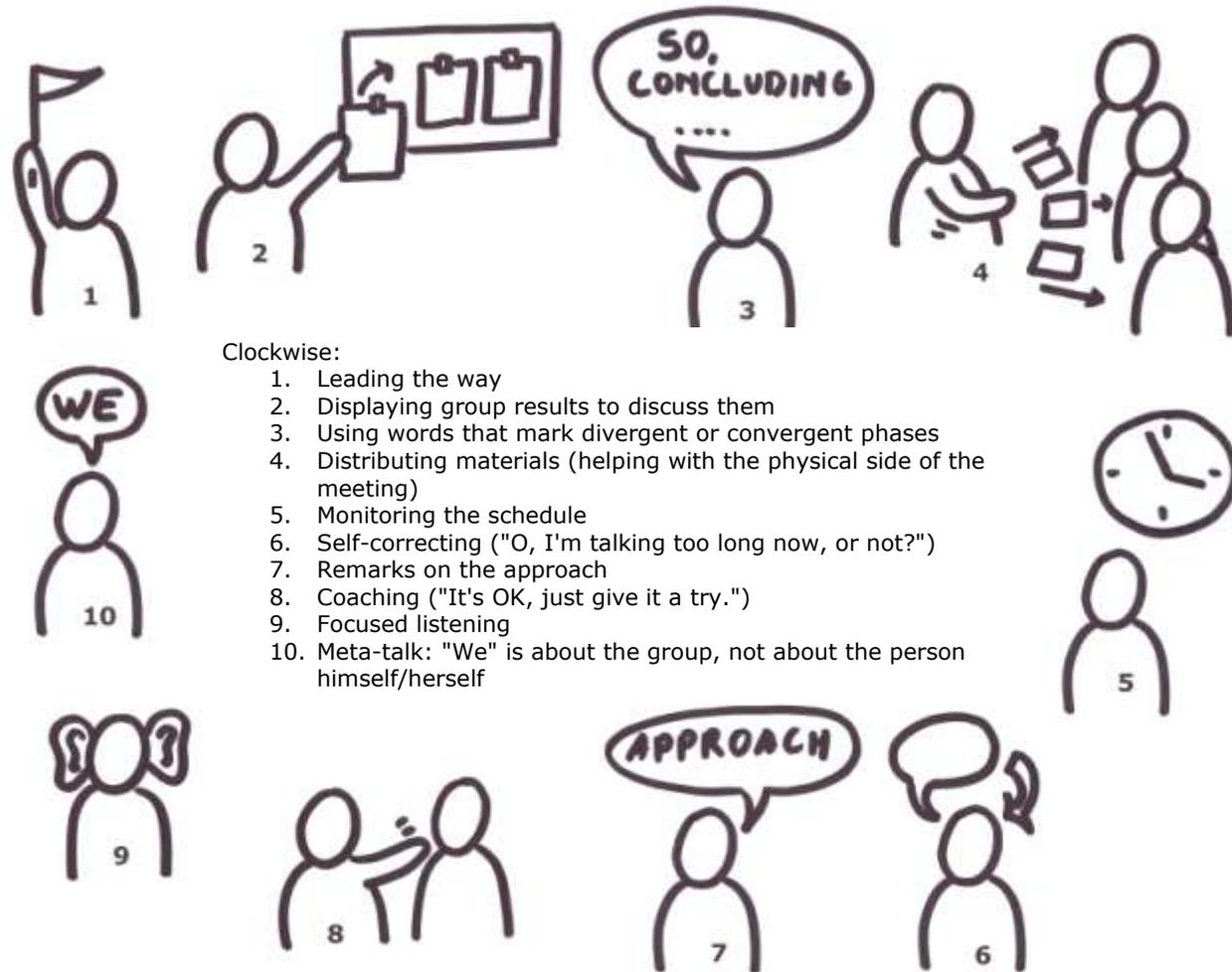
But there´s more: these observations are of use when there are other steps to take, in the design process itself or in the project the design process is part of. These observations yield opportunities for improving future design processes.

1. In the planning of the design process adjustments can be made to invite participants to get involved in the facilitation.

2. The facilitator, if there is one, can receive very specific feedback on his/her behavior, helping to improve his/her facilitating skills.

3. The facilitating can be improved by the choice of materials, the instructions given, the surroundings etcetera: all of those can be planned in advance to make facilitating easier to both the facilitator and the participants.

On the next page, 10 signs of facilitating behavior are presented.

Ten Signs Facilitating Is Taking Place

Clockwise:
1. Leading the way
2. Displaying group results to discuss them
3. Using words that mark divergent or convergent phases
4. Distributing materials (helping with the physical side of the meeting)
5. Monitoring the schedule
6. Self-correcting ("O, I'm talking too long now, or not?")
7. Remarks on the approach
8. Coaching ("It's OK, just give it a try.")
9. Focused listening
10. Meta-talk: "We" is about the group, not about the person himself/herself

Conclusion

Facilitating is not a job the facilitator does alone. Participants play their part too. If they feel welcome to help the facilitator facilitating, the design process will benefit.

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